A Town Called Malice by boneyaard

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Genre: Abuse, Alcohol, Apologies, Coming Out, Disability, Drinking, Healing, Homophobic Language, LGBTQ Themes, Lots of cussin' and talkin' about sex, M/M, Mental Instability, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Recreational Drug Use, Romance, Sibling Bonding, Slow Burn, Smoking, Suicide, Trigger warnings:, aka weed lol, and some heavy reflection, billy does some fuckin apoligizing, if you want me to add any more tags just let me know!, kacey musgraves voice:, learning to love, max and billy bonding, r-slur, robin gets a gf
Language: English
Characters: Billy Hargrove, Billy Hargrove's Mother, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Susan Hargrove, Tina (Stranger Things), Tommy Hagan, Will Byers
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Summary:

Hawkins holds secrets, the kind that conquer and divide. When Billy barely survives the attack of the Mind Flayer on that fateful hot Fourth of July, he is left blinded and scarred in more ways than one. As Hawkins settles back into a new normal, Steve makes a spur-of-the-moment decision to offer his friendship to the one person who he feels might need it most: Billy Hargrove. Though the darkness of the Upside Down may try to rip people apart, sometimes it’s the thing that brings them together.

1. “You Got Another Thing Comin”" — Judas Priest (1982)

Author's Note:

> The first two chapters cover seasons two and three with a few changes, after that the fic begins proper! Updates frequently, as this story is complete and I just have to do one last edit to the chapters before I post them!
>
> If you would like to see the front and back cover I drew for this story, please go check it out on my tumblr, username: theboneyaard ! Thank you.

October 30th, 1984

Billy opened his eyes.

It was cold in his bedroom. It was never this cold in his room. For a few blissful moments he couldn’t remember why...Then it all came crashing back to him like a rogue wave. He wasn’t in California anymore. He was in the middle of some backwater shithole town in the middle of fucking nowhere, USA. His Dad had dragged him kicking and screaming across ten states to get away from Max’s Dad, and now he was two thousand miles away from the Pacific Ocean, two thousand miles away from his friends, from his high school, from the warm sun... His gut burned, a fury raging in his gut that was so strong he felt sick. His nostrils flared, staring up at the cracked white ceiling. It wasn’t his fucking fault Susan and her crazy daughter were such spazzes. Why did *he* have to be punished for it? He flung himself out of bed and looked at his furious expression in the mirror. He ground his teeth so badly that he bit his cheek. Blood pooled thickly on his tongue.

In L.A. he could stay out late, come home late, douse himself in liquor at the clubs that operated under the wire and in the endless maze that was the sprawling city. In Shithole, Indiana, he was trapped like a caged animal. He’d driven around the entirety of the town in under half an hour the day before while his dumbass half-

sister was at the crappy little building these people called an arcade. All around the town limits were endless fields, endless woods, endless fuck all. Where would he go now? Where would he escape to? There was nowhere to run...Nowhere to hide.

He ripped open his closet and stared at his clothes, most still in boxes. He pulled a long sleeve shirt from the pile and put it on, yanking a pair of jeans up his legs, throwing on a denim coat. He checked himself in the mirror and paused. He hesitated for a moment, then changed his shirt. This one was better. He scowled, flipping his hair over his collar. Not that it mattered... This shithole didn't even have a godforsaken mall. They barely had a fucking transit system. He lit a cigarette, shivering, hating the fact that when he blinked, this shitty unfamiliar bedroom wasn't going away. His Dad wanted him to drive Max to school every day like he was her fucking mother and wait up for her after school like a fussy parent. He sneered at the floor, smoke curling from his nostrils. What, was she too good to take the school bus like all the other kids who lived in this trash neighbourhood? He flicked his cigarette into the ashtray on his bedside table.

Max. This was all her fucking fault. His dad's precious Susan and her freckled little bitch of a daughter...

Someone pounded on his door.

"Billy! Hurry the hell up, you're gonna be liate!" his Dad's furious voice yelled to him through the door.

Fine , he thought, smoothing out his hair, licking his lips, his blue eyes on fire with hatred. *Fine.*

Steve handed Nancy his essay. It was two sheets of loose leaf, double-sided, covered with his scrawl in blue ball-point pen. The morning sun filtering through the windows of the car was warm for October, and he felt a nervous sweat begin to trickle down his back. He wasn't used to anybody reading his writing, since he knew his writing was pretty much crap. He internally cursed himself as he watched Nancy read. He'd never even bothered to think about college until he'd started dating her. She was smart and ambitious, and he knew she

was going to end up well educated and successful, and he was determined to be educated and successful along with her. He could tell she longed to get out of Hawkins, to get away from the trap of suburbia. He knew that if he got a job with his Dad and stayed in Hawkins, their relationship wouldn't survive– And he wanted, very desperately, for it to survive.

The fact of the matter was that he was stupidly, idiotically, deeply in love with Nancy Wheeler. It had happened quite by accident, starting with a little smile at the studious, quiet girl walking with her friend Barbara, sending her teasing notes, making funny faces at her while she tried to study in the library, asking her out on a date... Suddenly, he'd found himself absolutely smitten with her, enough that he'd come crawling back even after he'd thought she had cheated on him, alienating his only friends in the process. Tommy H. and Carole were assholes anyway, but… He'd been an asshole too. He hoped, very dearly, that he wasn't as much of an asshole as he used to be.

He also hoped very dearly to marry Nancy someday… Which meant college.

"It's crap, I know," he said dully.

"No, it's not crap!" Nancy exclaimed kindly.

"It's... Not good," he muttered.

"It's going to be," she said bracingly, smiling. "It just needs some reorganizing..."

Steve sighed heavily, his hand on the steering wheel of his father's BMW.

"Can I mark on it?" she asked him.

"Yeah, I guess...," he said. That didn't bode well. He knew it was complete shit, but he'd hoped that maybe it was at least a little bit less shit than usual.

"So... In the first paragraph you use the basketball game against Northern as a metaphor for your life, which is great! But then...

Around here…" (she circled something in pen) "You start talking about your granddad's experiences in the war, and I... um... I don't see how they're connected?"

Nancy winced sympathetically at him.

"It connects because... Uh, because we both won," Steve said, flicking his wrist. He tried to sound confident, but he knew what he'd written was probably nonsensical.

Nancy gave him a look, one that was simultaneously pitying and maybe a little judgemental.

"What, you think I should start from scratch?" he asked, alarmed.

"No, no I mean...," Nancy pursed her lips. She looked at him. "When's the deadline?"

"It's tomorrow for early application," he said, a feeling of desperation growing inside him. "Can you come by and help me tonight?"

"No, we have our dinner tonight, remember?"

Steve's gut sank into his shoes.

"Oh my god," he groaned, slamming his skull into the tan leather headrest.

"We already cancelled last week... You don't have to go. Just work on this..."

"No, no, no... What's the point?" he muttered, grabbing the essay and balling it up and throwing it into the backseat, defeated.

"Hey, calm down!" Nancy urged, exasperated.

"No, no, I'm calm, I'm calm. I'm just being honest, you know," Steve said gloomily. "I mean, I'm just gonna end up workin' for my Dad anyway..."

"That's not true..." she said quietly.

“I dunno, Nance, is that such a bad thing?” he asked, looking at her, shrugging. “There’s insurance and benefits and all that adult stuff...And if I took it, you know, I could be around for your senior year...”

“Steve...,” she said softly, sympathetically.

“Just to look after you a little bit... Make sure you don’t forget about this pretty face...”

God, he was a fool for her. He knew it, and she knew it, and he couldn’t find it in himself to care. Nancy looked away, chuckling softly, like what he had said was a joke.

“Nance, I’m serious,” he said, gazing at her. Her pretty brown hair glinted in the morning sun, her eyes sharp and quick. She was so beautiful… She turned her head toward him and he kissed her.

“I love you,” he said, sincerely.

“I love you, too,” she said quietly. She sounded almost sad.

A loud, revving engine interrupted their moment. Nancy got out of the car, looking out into the distance. Steve followed her, leaning on the burgundy roof of his father’s BMW. From the entrance of the parking lot, something beastly and mean was growling across the broken pavement. A well-loved Chevrolet Camaro in a starlit navy blue came rocketing into a parking spot, blaring heavy rock at a volume that Steve would never be able to bear at 8 o’clock in the morning on school day. He watched, flicking his sunglasses onto his head as the unfamiliar car pulled crookedly into a parking spot and jolted to a halt. Steve saw that it had California plates. The driver’s door opened and a boot hit the pavement. A guy got out of the driver’s side of the car. He was wearing tight denim jeans, a white shirt, and a scuffed blue jean jacket, a pack of smokes stuffed into the front breast pocket. The stranger put a cigarette to his lips and looked around. Steve internally recoiled when he saw the stranger’s face. His handsome features wore an expression of ill-concealed contempt and superiority. From the passenger side, a red-haired girl in baggy boy’s clothes got out, clutching a skateboard. She slammed the door shut behind her and skated off across the parking lot toward Hawkins

Middle, not bothering to say goodbye to the guy who'd driven her. The stranger's eyes landed on Nancy and Steve, and he gave them a small, cocky ghost of a smile before he turned around and made his way across the parking lot toward the school, chucking his cigarette on the way. Steve's eyes narrowed. Something wasn't right about this guy. His arrival felt odd, ill timed, like the wind had shifted directions and brought with it a dark cloud. Steve shifted on his feet, uneasy.

Tina and a few of her vapid girlfriends were leaning against a car nearby, and they practically melted as the stranger strutted by, twirling their hair, their heads swivelling like owls to get a better look at him. Steve watched Nancy's head follow the stranger too and felt a flash of jealousy flare up into his gut. She wouldn't like a guy like that... Right?

His fears were alleviated when she turned around with a sour expression on her face.

"He seems like a piece of work, whoever he is...," she said ruefully. "See how he didn't even say goodbye to his sister or anything?"

Steve looked at her and his heart soared. That was his beautiful, brilliant Nancy. Nothing escaped her notice. He knew he was grinning like an idiot but he couldn't stop it and didn't care.

He loved Nancy, and she loved him.

October 31st, 1984

Billy righted himself, spraying beer and spit into the air, hollering in triumph. It dribbled down his chin and onto his chest and coat. Someone handed him a cigarette.

"We got ourselves a new Keg King!"

He heard a swirling crowd screaming his name, like a heartbeat pulsing all around him.

"THAT'S HOW YOU DO IT, HAWKINS! That's how you do it!" Billy hollered.

He was fucked up and he knew it. These country bumpkins wouldn't know liquor if it smacked them in the nuts. They were all lightweights, every single goddamned one of them. Billy was more of a whisky man at heart, but he had heard some popular guy named Stan Hartman or Harrison or whatever the fuck held a keg stand record that had yet to be beaten in the last three years. Back in L.A. he'd had practice, lots of practice.

He'd broken it— Easily.

The freckle faced boy, whatever his name was, followed him as he made his way into the house, leading him with his hand on his shoulders. He looked up and found some toilet paper hanging from the ceiling and wiped the beer from his face. The boy led him through the chaos and parked him in front of that guy with perfect hair who looked stone cold sober and extremely annoyed.

"We got ourselves a new Keg King, Harrington," sneered Freckle Face. Two other boys joined in.

"Yeah, that's right!"

"Yeah, eat it, Harrington!"

The lights were going wild in the room and Billy's head swam as he tried to stare him down. Different parts of this Harrington guy were going in and out of focus. His hair swung into his vision, then his cheeks, flushed… His furrowed brow, his pink lips. Billy stared stupidly. Here was that guy again, the grim-faced guy with the even gloomier girlfriend, the one who hadn't immediately been overtaken by his charm. He and his girlfriend had been the only ones. Billy had been like a sensation on his first day. A middle aged, doe-eyed secretary had ushered him to his class, handing him his schedule and the details of his classes with reverence, and giggling a little too loudly at everything he said. He'd walked into the classroom and every single person had stared at him like they'd never seen anything like him before in their lives. Only two people seemed to be unimpressed, and he was unsurprised to see that it was the couple that he'd spied staring at him from the red BMW across the parking lot not half an hour before.

“Everyone, this is William Hargrove, coming to us all the way from California. I hope you’ll make him feel welcome,” the elderly teacher had said, giving him a small, genuine smile and patting him on the shoulder. Billy, unused to anyone smiling genuinely, had flinched away from the man’s touch.

“Billy,” he’d corrected, smirking around the classroom. He’d winked at one of the girls that had been staring at him that morning, and she’d blushed.

Girls had started to follow him around. He’d heard their giggles, their whispers, as he passed. He’d smirked at them, blinked his long eyelashes, put his hand above them in doorways. He had only been there a day and he could already see the boys around him seething, writhing in anger, watching their girlfriends, fuckbuddies, and crushes cast their mascara eyes on him. They wanted to act but they were too afraid. He was an unknown factor. On his way out of class earlier that day, Halloween, a dark haired girl with a freckle face and small tits had handed him an orange paper. Tina was her name. He had nodded to her, giving her a smile, assuring he’d be at whatever sad little function she was organizing. He’d spent hours getting ready. He knew these hicks were just waiting for him to fuck up so the boys could crawl back into their spots as the kings of the town. He wouldn’t let them.

He had spent the majority of the party drinking, insidiously putting himself between girlfriends and boyfriends, watching in dull, far off amusement as the boyfriends frothed at the mouth and the girlfriends drooled. When Freckle Face had mentioned the keg stand record, he’d leapt up onto the keg without hesitation.

Now he was standing stupidly in front of the guy who had been giving him disgusted looks all night, and now he knew his name. Finally up close, Billy had the dazzling realization that he was the prettiest boy he had ever seen. The world seemed to freeze. Harrington was speaking. He exchanged some nasty words with Freckle Face, Tim or Todd or whatever his name was. Then he disappeared, chasing after his girlfriend. Billy staggered off, stumbling over party goers and furniture. He was wasted and sloppy and Freckle Face was trailing after him, singing his praises, and he wished he would just fuck off. There was no place for that kind of

thing in a small town like this. There was nowhere to hide. He looked up and saw one of the girls who had been giving him eyes all night. She was loaded too. He staggered towards her.

November 1st, 1984

Billy felt it, the stirring warmth in his gut when he remembered what it felt like to be free and beautiful and anonymous in the labyrinth of Los Angeles, disappearing laughing under the ocean, stealing kisses and more in dark corners. He blinked his blue eyes at the sweaty, wiry boy with the perfect hair slamming his arm into his chest and thumping his elbow against the hammering of his heart. The other boy was called Harrington, Steve Harrington, the patchy memory of the Halloween party the night before swimming back to him. His eyes were on the hazel side of brown and they were darting around looking for an opening, a way to ferry the basketball he was dribbling away from his clutches.

He wasn't going to get one.

Harrington slammed his back against his chest, trying to block him.

"Harrington, right?" Billy asked, mocking. "I heard you used to run this school. That true? King Steve they used to call you, huh? Then you turned bitch."

Billy played with him, blocking his every move. His taunt had made Harrington turn his head.

"Hey, maybe you should just shut up and just play the game," Harrington said.

Billy felt almost gleeful as he slammed him to the floor, leaping into the air and scoring with ease.

He whooped, turning around.

Steve had gotten to his feet, sweating, staring up at him from where he was bent, his hands on his knees.

"Steve!"

He looked up and saw her, the King of Hawkins High's pretty little bird. Billy hadn't got a good look at her until now, and he supposed she was pretty enough… But her eyes were sharp and calculating, combining strangely with the soft pastels of her clothing. Harrington immediately got up and greeted her, like an eager dog. Billy sneered after him, unable to stop himself, knowing full well Harrington was madly in love with this girl with the flinty eyes. His mind went blank. He played the game, dodging, pushing, scoring. He saw a boy run out and shout to Harrington.

"That douchebag is killing us!" he heard the boy yell. Billy grinned.

He would show these hicks. He would show them all. They would worship the ground he walked on by the time he finally got enough money to rev his engines homeward, back to L.A., back to his real life. This was how he was going to survive the next year. He would become their ruler. He would convince them all he was a force to be reckoned with.

Steve ran back into the gym and he looked upset, his jaw clenched, his eyes cast downward. Billy threw him the ball and he looked up, startled.

Billy lifted his chin and smirked at Steve Harrington, and felt he could conquer the world.

Hawkins didn't know about his secrets. They didn't know his history. He was free to begin again, purge himself of the whispers he'd left behind, become top dog.

And he would start with Steve.

November 2nd, 1984

Steve was face to face with that asshole Billy Hargrove again. Sweat dripped down his face as Billy stared him down, dribbling the basketball, easy as you please, grinning.

"Alright!" Billy crowed, laughing. "Alright, alright, alright!"

Billy gestured to him, like he was introducing a musical act.

“King Steve! King Steve, everyone!” he called, dribbling closer, putting his glistening face near. “I like it. Playing tough today.”

Steve couldn’t comprehend why this dickhead was so obsessed with him. It wasn’t like he was all that popular anymore… In fact, he didn’t give a single shit that this beastly asshole was climbing the social ladder of Hawkins High. Big fucking whoop. Just like Nancy had said, it was all bullshit. She was bullshit. And Billy Hargrove, *especially* , was fucking bullshit.

“Jesus, do you ever stop talking? Come on!” he exclaimed. He was sick of the theatrics. To his chagrin, Billy straightened up, dribbling nonchalantly, laughing.

“What?” Billy chuckled. “You afraid the coach is gonna bench you now that I’m here? Huh?”

Steve blinked. He hadn’t thought of that.

In the millisecond it took for Steve to process Billy’s words, he got an elbow in the gut and was falling backwards, sprawling onto the gym floor. He could hear the squeak of Billy’s shoes as he ran, the sound of the net as the basketball swished through it. Steve looked up and saw Billy coming toward him. His expression was wolffish. For a strange, crazy moment, he thought Billy was going to hit him. Then he extended a hand, offering to help him up. Steve stared at it sourly for a second and then took it. Billy pulled him up a little and stopped short, his sweat-covered face a few inches from his own. He could see the contempt in his blue eyes. His eyelashes were stupidly long for a guy. What kinda dude had those kinda eyelashes?

“You were moving your feet,” Billy told him softly. “Plant them next time. Draw a charge.”

Billy slammed him back down onto the gym floor, letting go of his hand. He walked away.

Steve turned and watched him go.

Fifteen minutes later found Steve standing under the warm water of the shower, lathering his hair with shampoo and trying not to have

sentient thoughts. He felt numb, angry, and betrayed. He still couldn't believe that Nancy couldn't bring herself to say she loved him yesterday. Had she lied to him? Had all those times he thought he was gonna marry her just the dreams of a dumbass kid? No... No, they couldn't have been. No way. He really, truly loved her. She hurt him, lied to him... And stupid sap that he was, he still fucking loved her. She was everything he had ever wanted and more. He was glad he was in the shower. Nobody could tell you were crying in the shower... Right? Someone came into the shower beside him and he knew, from the swaggering way that he held himself, that it was Billy Hargrove. Across from him, Tommy stepped in, turning on the tap. It seemed he had found another asshole to worship instead of him. Steve was glad. He didn't give a shit about Tommy anymore, and he wondered how he had ever given a shit about him. He was dumb as fuck and mean with it. His ribs and taunts were more annoying than anything else.

Billy's insults, on the other hand, stung. He couldn't explain why. Billy was a dick, sure... But unlike Tommy, who prided himself on being a big meathead, Steve could tell Billy wasn't stupid. He had a sharpness about him that didn't just extend to his personality. Oddly, the way his eyes narrowed and flicked around reminded him of Nancy. He was strangely cold and standoffish even when his voice was friendly. It unnerved Steve. At least Tommy wore his cruel stupidity on his sleeve. Billy's malice was always there but it seemed to float just below the surface, veiled behind the cocky little smirks he threw around.

... Like the one he was giving Steve right now.

In any other situation he would have accused someone staring that long at him in the shower of being a homo, but he knew that Billy was doing this to try and get a rise out of him.

"Don't sweat it, Harrington," Billy said. "Today's just not your day, man."

His expression was somewhat genuine, a strange dance of mockery and sympathy in his face, which surprised Steve a little. Then it was gone. He turned around to get his towel.

“Yeah. Not your week,” Tommy’s voice grated from the other side. “You and the princess break up for one day, and she’s already running off with the freak’s brother.”

Steve felt something icy form in his gut at his word and gave Tommy a long suffering look.

“Oh shit... You don’t know,” Tommy said, his voice a farce of sympathy, grinning. “Jonathan and the Princess skipped yesterday. Still haven’t shown.”

Tommy leaned in.

“But that must just be a coincidence, right?” he asked, immediately dissolving into a wheeze of laughter. He turned off the shower and walked away, disappearing around the corner. Steve felt like he had been punched. Billy watched Tommy leave, amused, like a beleaguered Dad at his shithead son.

Steve lathered his hair, his mind racing. He knew exactly what Jonathan and Nancy were doing, and it wasn’t what Tommy thought. He felt panic rising in his gut. Didn’t they know how dangerous it was?

“Don’t take it too hard, man,” Billy said, interrupting his panicked train of thought. There was a strange smirk on his face. Steve was distinctly aware of Billy putting his arm up on the shower pole, his head tilted toward him.

“A pretty boy like you’s got nothin’ to worry about,” he said. Steve thought that was a strange thing to say about another guy, particularly to one that was naked and blocking him in a shower. Steve refused to look at him, uncomfortable, unsure. If this was Billy’s way of trying to bully him… Well, shit, it was working. He was definitely not feeling all that confident right now... Steve resolutely stared forward.

“Plenty of bitches in the sea,” Billy continued his voice closer. He must have leaned in.

Maybe Steve’s refusal to look at him pissed him off, because he

leaned back and slapped the knob on his shower, cutting off the spray. Steve wiped his face, his hair still full of shampoo, and finally looked at Billy. He was staring, his head tilted, a smirk on his face, straightening out his towel. He leaned over and slapped Steve once on the back, walking away around the shower pole.

“I’ll be sure to leave you some,” he said, not bothering to look at him or cover himself with a towel.

Steve watched him go.

Annoyed, hurt, panicked, and mostly just heartbroken, Steve slapped the shower back on with his fist.

November 3rd, 1984

For the first time since he’d arrived at the shithole that he now called home, Billy was in a good mood.

He had a date.

The girl was actually pretty cute— Heather was her name. A rich girl who had money from her daddy, and acted like it. It was a particular taste of his, these rich kids with straight white fences whose parents made more money than he’d ever seen in his life. He’d dated a hot blonde named Cynthia King back in L.A. whose father worked as the head of a department in some big company. For all of their clean pastel Esprit tops and white Keds, one thing he had learned about these rich, straight-laced kids was that they loved to get down and dirty. They loved to drink until they puked, do drugs until their eyes were wide as saucers, fuck until they screamed. Billy had some half notions about it maybe being because their lives were so boring and sad they needed something to make it interesting, but he hadn’t really thought too hard about it. This was mostly because he *was* that bad influence... And he loved it. He loved to watch rich dads in sweater vests and Sperry’s go beet red in fury when their daughters brought him home, one earring dangling in his ear, his shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest. This Heather girl was a cute chick who didn’t smell like cheap perfume. Her makeup was gentler than some of the other girls around her, and she had a certain

amount of backbone that he admired.

He sprayed his hair, adjusting one of his curls. Metallica screamed from the speakers. He dabbed Aramis on his wrists, and took some in his palm, his hand diving down into his underwear. He massaged some around his dick, a trick he had learned from an old friend of his. Whenever a chick was about to give you head, she got a whiff of your cologne. They went nuts for it. This trick was best used in the warm weather of California, as having sweaty balls was far less likely in the chilly air of Indiana, but old habits died hard. And anyways— It wasn't like the chick he'd fucked yesterday, who had practically tried to jump his bones the second he walked on the high school grounds. This chick, Heather, needed a little more panache. He checked his profile in the mirror, giving a little pose, checking his ass. All in good order. He leaned into the mirror and winked at himself. He was gonna get his cock sucked tonight by the hottest chick in school.

A knock on his door.

"Billy?" Susan called.

He exhaled his cigarette.

"Yeah, I'm a little busy in here, Susan," he called back. He wasn't a particular fan of Susan, but he was never really mean to her. She got enough of that from his Dad.

"Open the door! Right now!" his Dad yelled.

Billy stared at himself in the mirror and watched as his confidence faded from his eyes, being replaced by something that he hated. He took one last puff of his cigarette for good measure and crushed it in the ashtray. He walked over to his bedroom door, opening it.

"What's wrong?" he asked, trying to keep his voice level.

"Why don't you tell us?" Neil asked. His face was stormy and dark. Susan looked meek and a little upset beside him.

"Because I don't know," Billy bit sarcastically.

“We can’t find Maxine,” Susan explained, her voice upset but level, clearly far more concerned about her daughter than angry at her step-son. He appreciated that she didn’t immediately accuse him of wrongdoing like his Dad had done.

“And her window’s open,” Neil added on patronizingly.

Billy looked away, feeling oddly betrayed for a moment. That little bitch *knew* it was his job to take care of her and she had snuck out on him! He was going to kill her. She never thought about anybody but herself! Didn’t she know what would happen if their parents thought he’d gone and got her lost? No— She didn’t know. She *never* got the bad end of his father’s wrath. That privilege was reserved for him, and him alone.

“Where is she?” his Dad demanded.

Billy fidgeted, feeling like an ant under a microscope. He could tell his Dad’s fury was mounting by the second.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly, a lot less aggressive than he had meant to sound. He supposed he did that for Susan’s sake. She was just upset that her daughter was gone. He could get that— at least, theoretically.

“You don’t know?” Neil scoffed. This was the DEW line, the caution tape. Billy knew that if he raised his voice, tried to fight—

“Look, I’m sure she just... Went to the arcade or something,” he said, turning away from his father, going toward his closet to get his coat. He forced his voice to be calm, reasonable— Even reassuring. He really wanted to go out tonight.

Billy heard Neil come into the room behind him.

“You were supposed to watch her,” he said. His voice just barely contained his fury.

Billy sighed, trying to keep himself as small as possible, not giving his Dad any opportunities to react.

“I know, Dad, I was...,” he said, a little frustrated, putting on his coat.

“It’s just that you guys were three hours late, and I have a date…”

He turned around, flipping his hair over the collar of his jacket and adjusting the sleeves.

“I’m sorry, okay?”

His father crossed his arms. Here it came.

“So that’s why you been starin’ at yourself in the mirror like some faggot instead of watching your sister?”

There was no point in staying calm now. Neil wanted a fight, and he was going to get it whether Billy wanted to fight or not. Billy was at least going to try and get a few words in edgewise.

“I have been looking after her all week, Dad! Okay? Look, if she wants to run off then that’s her problem, alright? She’s thirteen years old, she shouldn’t need a full-time babysitter! And she’s not my sister!”

He shut off Metallica.

The DEW line had been crossed. Like an enraged beast suddenly let loose, Neil jumped forward and grabbed Billy by the front of his coat, slamming him against the shelf. Billy felt the wood pressing painfully into his spine. His father’s face was inches from his own, the muscles in his jaw twinging.

“What did we talk about?” Neil whispered.

Billy stared.

A fist crashed across his face, sending him lurching sideways. He heard Susan make a small noise of discomfort from the door. Neil grabbed his face.

“What did we… Talk about?” Neil asked, enunciating each word, his voice falling to a deadly croon.

“Respect and responsibility,” Billy recited, the words coming unbidden from somewhere deep inside of him, a response triggered

in an effort to save him from further hurt. His face became a blank slate, his pride disintegrating and his mind slipping into nothing, his entire body tense and focused on surviving the next few minutes.

“That is right,” Neil said in a sing-song voice. “Now. Apologize to Susan.”

“I’m sorry, Susan,” he said, his voice blank. Behind him, Susan was hovering by the door looking scared.

“It’s okay, Neil, really—“ she said, her voice sounding a little teary. Billy felt a small, distant flare of affection for her despite her inefficacy in protecting him. She at least tried to calm Neil down... But there was no calming Neil down, and now he directed some of his fury at her for daring to question his judgement.

“No, it is not okay, nothing about his behaviour is okay!” Neil exclaimed, his voice angry and loud.

Neil let him go, turning around, staring at Susan.

“But he’s gonna make up for it. He’s gonna call... Whatever whore he’s seeing tonight, and cancel their date.”

His Dad turned his head halfway between Susan at the door and Billy still pressed into the bookcase.

“And then he’s gonna go find his sister... Like the good, kind...”

He turned to Billy, his steely eyes staring directly into his.

“Respecting brother that he is.”

Billy stared at his father. He knew there were tears in his eyes. The adrenaline of being hit was beginning to wear off, the blissful detachment that came over him when his father had his hands on him fading quickly.

“Isn’t that right, Billy?”

Billy stared blankly, unable to move his lips.

Neil stalked forward.

“Isn’t that right?!” he shouted in his face.

Billy found his voice at last.

“Yes, sir,” he said softly, his mouth barely moving, his voice croaking.

Neil leaned forward, tilting his head threateningly.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear you...”

Billy felt sick to his stomach.

“Yes. Sir,” he repeated louder.

His father gave him one last dark look.

“Find Max,” he murmured threateningly. He stalked out of the room.

Through the tears in his eyes he could see Susan had come into the room, still by the door. He watched as she stepped away from Neil as he stalked out. He bent his head. He wanted her to go away. Having her come over to comfort him would only make him feel worse. Thankfully, she left. The door closed. The tears that he’d been holding back came now, before he could stop them. He felt sick, disgusted with himself. He was weak. Every time his father tried to bully him, he succeeded— And nobody ever helped him. Nobody! Not Susan, not her stupid kid Max— He was alone. He punched something. It broke. He put his head in his hands, feeling furious and ashamed and, worst of all, scared.

And now he had to call Heather and tell her he couldn’t make their date.

This was all Max’s fault.

When he found her, he’d kill her.

Billy drove down the long, dark driveway that led to Jonathan Byers’

place, his headlights illuminating a house that was even shittier than his, something he hadn't thought possible until that moment. As he drove onto the lawn and pulled his car into park, he watched as someone walked out of the front door and down the porch steps.

Steve. Fucking. Harrington.

A million confused questions went haywire in his head. First of all— Why was he at the Byer's house? Were he and that Jonathan kid friends? Unlikely, considering Jonathan Byers had stolen his girlfriend. He got out of the car, leaning against the door, and took a long drag of his cigarette.

"Am I dreaming, or is that you, Harrington?" he asked. Steve was standing there with his hands on his hips like a pissed off mom coming out to fight the angry neighbour because her brats had ruined his rose bushes.

"Yeah, it's me. Don't cream your pants," Steve replied, coming down the walk toward him. Billy threw off his jacket, throwing it into the car. He'd want free arms for this.

"What're you doin' here, amigo?" he asked, feeling strangely elated. He'd been wanting to kick someone's ass all week, and maybe Steve would give him a good reason. He walked forward and greeted him.

"I could ask you the same thing... Amigo," Steve said, crossing his arms. He sounded strangely distracted, like Billy's presence was an inconvenience.

"Looking for my step sister. A little birdie told me she was here," he said, calmly, eyeing Steve, a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth, ready to spit it away at a moment's notice.

Steve looked away, still with that suspiciously distracted expression on his face.

"Huh. That's weird. I don't know her," he lied, but without much commitment.

Billy tried again.

“Small?” he described, pinching the air. “Redhead? Bit of a bitch?”

He didn’t stare directly at them, but in the corner of his eye he saw Max and her little buddies peeking at them through the front window.

“Doesn’t ring a bell. Sorry, buddy,” Steve replied.

He felt a cold fury rising up inside of him. What the fuck was going on? Tonight was probably the worst night that he’d had in a while, and he’d had some doozies. First Max ran off, then his Dad smacked him around, then he’d had a brief reprieve with the unexpected beauty of Mrs. Wheeler, and now, despite how furious he was with Max, he found her and her hick friends alone in a stranger’s house with a boy who was five years their senior— He hadn’t liked Steve before because he was competition, and now he was convinced he was a weirdo too. As much as he wanted to wring Max’s neck, the creepiness of the situation overcame him and he figured it would just be his luck to find his sister being abused by a local pedo. Billy nodded, taking a long drag of his cigarette. Steve was getting the shit kicked out of him tonight, whether he knew it or not.

“You know, I don’t know, this...,” he flicked his hand in the air, clicking his tongue. “This whole situation, Harrington, I don’t know... It’s givin’ me the heebie jeebies.”

Steve looked into his eyes, knowing he’d been caught but trying to play it off.

“Yeah, why’s that?”

So Steve was gonna make him lay it out, huh?

“My thirteen year old sister goes missing all day... And then I find her with you... In a stranger’s house... And you lie to me about it.”

He leaned forward, his face disgusted and furious.

Steve shook his head, his voice overly casual.

“Man, were you dropped too much as a child, or what?” he chuckled.

The fight was brewing. Billy's fists itched. He ran his tongue along his teeth, his lips, his eyes lighting up with the prospect of finally getting to smash that stupid pretty boy's face in, ruining that perfect nose and those nice eyes. He couldn't wait.

"I don't know what you don't understand about what I just said," Steve continued, leaning in. "She's not here."

Billy pointed his cigarette at the window where Max was peeking out at him, staring into Steve's eyes.

"Then who is that?" he murmured dangerously.

Steve's head whipped around. Just as he did, the heads of Max and her little friends dipped below the sill.

"Aw, shit," Steve sighed. "Listen—"

Billy didn't listen. He gave Steve a push instead, toppling him over like a nine pin onto the concrete walk.

"I told you to plant your feet," he mocked quietly as Steve groaned.

He curb stomped Steve's gut, feeling nothing but wild pleasure as his boot made contact with his ribs. He looked up, remembering his sister. He would come back for Steve, but first— He had a lesson to teach. He stepped over Steve and went onto the porch, bursting through the door. Inside, Max was standing beside none other than Lucas Sinclair. He looked terrified. Two other kids were standing behind them, looking like they were gonna shit their pants. Max stared at him, angry, defiant, and scared.

"Well, well, well," he said, slamming the door and stalking forward. "Lucas Sinclair, what a surprise."

He flicked his eyes to Max. "I thought I told you to stay away from him, Max."

If she brought a Black boy home, Neil would bury her in the backyard. Maybe she hadn't realized that yet – But at this point he didn't really give a shit. Lucas was friends with the Byers kid. Heather had told him they were weird. One look inside their house

and he agreed with her.

“Billy, go away,” Max said, her cheeks glowing red.

“You disobeyed me...,” he whispered, feeling nothing but cold disdain. He stalked forward. “You know what happens when you disobey me...”

“Billy...,” she whispered fearfully.

“I break things,” he murmured, turning on Lucas and slamming him against a shelf. He heard the kids screaming and shouting behind him. He buried his fists into Lucas’ green vest. Lucas let out a garbled yell.

“Get off me, you—“

He interrupted him.

“Since Maxine won’t listen to me, maybe you will,” he muttered lowly. “Stay away from her.”

He smacked the shelf behind him, making Lucas flinch.

“Stay away from her! You hear me?”

He had to give it to this kid. He was brave.

“I said, get off of me!” he shouted, trying to wrench himself from Billy’s grip. Suddenly, pain exploded in his groin. The little fucker had kneed him in the balls! He staggered backward, crouching, groaning in pain. He straightened up, staring wide eyed into Lucas’s face, who was staring back at him in fear and defiance.

“You are so dead, Sinclair! Dead!”

Someone grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

Steve.

“No,” he said, hopping a little on the spot, a grimace on his face, winding up a punch. “You are!”

Steve's fist collided with his face and he was flung sideways, staggering against the bookshelf. He sprung up immediately, a cackle escaping up through his throat from somewhere deep inside, like a demon that had been curled in his gut had been awoken from sleep. A feral, unbridled rage that had been boiling in his heart bubbled over and filled every nerve in his body with raging fire. He threw back his head and howled with laughter.

"Looks like you got some fire in you, after all, huh?" he roared, blood dripping slowly from his nose.

He gestured at Steve mockingly, his nice shoes, perfect hair, his Members Only jacket.

"I've been waiting to meet this King Steve everyone's been telling me so much about..."

He stalked forward, his eyes wide, feeling unstable and ferocious and not giving a shit that his control was slipping. If he didn't get knocked out soon, nobody would be able to stop him—And he didn't care. Steve looked at him with contempt, a look so cold that it burnt him. He was looking at him like he was nothing more than a stupid goddamn bully, a piece of poor trash that acted like a fucking animal. Billy hated him, despised him, wanted to destroy everything he stood for and everything he was.

"Get out," Steve said quietly, giving him a little push on the chest.

Billy stared at him.

His face was so nice, so symmetrical. His skin was smooth, a little mole that he hadn't noticed before sitting pretty on his cheekbone. He had nice eyes, *kind* eyes, even when they were icy with disdain. His hair really was perfect. He wasn't surprised he was known for it. His lips looked soft to the touch.

Billy swung his fist.

Faster than lightning, Steve ducked out of the way and his fist collided with Billy's face once again. The kids started up a roar behind him, watching them brawl like it was a cage match at the

WWF and Steve had just caught him with a chair. Billy flung up, laughing, deranged, blood pooling in his mouth and across his teeth.

Steve hit him again. And again.

He staggered against the kitchen counter, his hands touching some plates out to dry. He was laughing, laughing, laughing.

He grabbed a plate and smashed it over Steve's perfect head, shattering it. Steve yelled out in pain, clutching his skull, staggering. He stalked forward and kicked him. Steve stumbled away. He heard the roar die out behind him, fear overtaking the spectators. The heel was winning this fight now. What would the little kids do without their hero? He punched Steve, sending him flying against a wall.

He grabbed Steve by the front of his coat. He was groaning.

"No one tells me what to do," he said, blood spurting iron rich and dark across his mouth.

Billy hit Steve again, making him topple sideways onto the ground.

"WHOO! Get up!" he whooped, walking over to where Steve lay prone on the floor.

He straddled Steve, raising his fist.

Crack.

He ruined that smooth, attractive dip in the hollow of his cheek.

Crack.

His pretty, kind eye was smashed, going bloodshot, turning purple.

Crack.

His long, symmetrical nose was broken, bleeding onto his fist. Billy was screaming, screaming, screaming. He felt like sobbing, vomiting, killing himself, kissing Steve, murdering his father, setting the house on fire. He wanted to be more than dead, he wanted to be the God of death. He wanted to be its master. He wanted Steve to beg for mercy

and he wanted to be the one to deny it.

Crack.

Was Steve dead? If he was, Billy would follow suit. There was nothing for him in the world anymore, no joy or sweetness— Only cruelty and the knowledge that he was his father's son.

Crack.

Crack.

Crack.

Something sharp stung him in the neck.

He stopped, grunting, staggering upright. Something wrong and alien was sticking out of him. He spun around to see Max looking at him the way that someone might look at a rabid animal finally being put down. His vision warped and blurred. Billy grabbed whatever was sticking out of him, yanking it out with a wince.

A big, fat syringe.

He staggered towards Max, fear suddenly gripping him. He felt strange, his body becoming heavy.

"The hell is this?" he managed to mutter, staring at her. When he spoke, his voice sounded far away, like an echo in a dream."You little shit, what did you do? What did you do?"

He was slowly losing control of his body. He pitched forward, then backward. He hit the floor. A cruel laugh crackled out of his throat, suddenly finding all this very funny. Steve was hanging with thirteen year olds, Max had stabbed him with a needle, the walls and the ceiling of this house were plastered in crazy drawings he didn't understand, the smell of rot and mold clung in his nostrils… It was all very, very funny, like some sick joke that had no punchline. The blurry image of Max wielding a baseball bat came swimming into his vision. For some reason, it had nails hammered into it.

"From here on out, you leave me and my friends alone. Do you

understand?"

Her voice was low and angry. The edges of his vision pulsed and blurred.

"Screw you," he muttered, his eyes becoming very heavy.

A noise like an explosion sounded out. The baseball bat came down between his outstretched legs, grinding into the wood floor. He lifted his head, staring down the zipper of his Levi's where the bat was embedded inches from his crotch. She yanked it up again.

"Say you understand! Say it! Say it!" she screamed at him. Her voice echoed around in his head.

Say it... Say it... Say it...

It's your fault we're here... Say it. Say it, Maxine... SAY IT!

He licked his lips.

"I understand," he muttered.

"What?" she demanded.

I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you...

Yes. Sir.

"I understand," he repeated, past his failing tongue, past his eyes closing on their own.

He heard the bat clatter to the floor.

Then he knew nothing.

December 16th, 1984

Billy watched from afar as Susan twirled Max's fiery red hair into twists and braids, clipping them together with bobby pins. Beside him, the twinkle lights on the Christmas tree winked and sparkled, a multicolour frenzy of greens and blues and reds. She noticed him and

looked up, staring him down.

He blinked slowly at her. He didn't know how to tell her he was sorry, so he walked away.

Leave me and my friends alone.

He had. For better or worse, he had. The month after The Incident, he had kept his promise. He drove her to school and drove her home. Whenever she knocked on his door, he would answer and drive her to the store, the arcade, to the houses of her friends, never saying a word. His newfound adjustment to having to be Max's chauffeur seemed to please Neil and confuse Susan. In the three weeks since he had woken up in the Byers' house, alone, his car gone, the house covered in strange and disturbing drawings, he had kept his head down. This also had the welcome effect of not being the centre of his father's attention, which was a plus. He hadn't gone this long without fucking up in a very, very long time. Billy went into his room and put on his coat. He grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the bedside table and put them in the pocket, walking out and closing the door behind him. He went to wait by the door. Max came striding out of the bathroom. She looked flushed and clearly had reached the limit of how much girly pampering from her mother she could take. She looked nice. Susan put her in the living room, in front of the China cabinet, and took out her Polaroid. In his chair, he actually saw his Dad smile.

Over by the door, Billy felt very far away from them. He'd realized that he was the one who was ruining this little family. He was the one who his father hated, the one who he hurt the most. Susan and Max were precious to him, and his son was a reminder of the mistakes that he'd made. Billy was the one who caused all the trouble. He wondered, as Susan took a few pictures of Max, how happy they would all be if he just disappeared. Max came over to the door, looking embarrassed as her Mom followed her and tried to adjust her hair again.

Billy walked out of the kitchen door and down the steps.

They were happy. They didn't need him. He caused them pain. If he just did what he was told, his Dad wouldn't have to hurt him. He got

into his car and started the engine. A few moments later, Max got in the passenger seat, avoiding his eyes. He backed out, and drove off into the night. It was snowing softly, the flakes drifting down from the grey night sky. Max looked out the window. If he was going to go away, he should tell her he was sorry. Max, at the very least, deserved to know. He knew what it was like, not knowing. He licked his lips in the silence of the car, forming the words in his head, mentally practicing. It was two words. He could do it.

“I’m sorry,” he said. His voice was void of emotion, because nobody had ever properly apologized to him and he had no idea how he was supposed to do it.

Max turned to him, her brow furrowed.

“For what?” she asked.

Billy blinked. How could she not know what he was talking about?

“That day. At the Byers. And... Lucas,” Billy said, his words coming out stilted and unsure.

Max was silent for a while.

“You really scared him,” she said. “Lucas, I mean.”

Billy clenched his jaw, staring straight forward. In many a sleepless night in a month of sleepless nights he had replayed those events, so often that they felt worn out and fuzzy the way that tapes wore down if you played them too much. He knew what Lucas thought, why he was afraid, and it wasn’t true— Neil was the real person Lucas should be afraid of... But Neil hadn’t been there that night, terrorizing a group of kids. He had been. The shelf that he’d slammed Lucas against felt hard on his own back. Neil’s fists that had balled into his coat were his own, clutching Lucas by the front of his vest. He had come to the realization that he was exactly like his father, and it felt like a mortal wound on his heart that he’d never be able to recover from. His anger had slipped. He had tried so hard not to hurt people, but he couldn’t help it. He didn’t know any other way to live, any other way to make sure that they didn’t hurt him first. He had become the monster that had terrorized him his whole life, the thing

he hated. For this reason, he had to go away.

“You scared me too, Billy,” Max said quietly. He felt himself go cold. “I mean... You were always a dick, but you weren’t like... Like *that* ... Steve had to get a doctor to fix a part of his face, Will told me... You could have killed him, Billy...”

Billy didn’t say anything, because everything she was saying was true. He couldn’t defend himself. He didn’t want to defend himself.

“I know,” he said.

Steve had arrived at school after missing a few days with a big bandage over his nose, his eye dark, swollen, and purple. The coach of the basketball team had reemed him out for getting into fights when they had a match coming up. Billy heard it when he went to go to the showers after gym. He had crunched Steve’s ribs with his boot, and he’d spent the following week waiting for the other shoe to drop. He knew Steve’s family was rich. He’d had no doubt they’d come after him. But nothing happened. When asked, Steve would just shrug and say he got into a fight. He wouldn’t give any details, and since everybody was preoccupied with their own little lives, they soon forgot and moved on. He assumed it was because he didn’t want anyone to know that Billy Hargrove had kicked his ass, seeing as he had kicked his ass at everything else... But it seemed more than that. The disturbing drawings in the Byers’ place, the stench of rot and mold that clung to the house like a miasma... His mind struggled to comprehend what he’d been briefly a part of. Something was wrong in Hawkins, but Billy felt crazy when he tried to think about what exactly. As the weeks went on, rumours of Jonathan Byers and Nancy Wheeler’s relationship went swirling around the school, and Steve fell into a state of social insignificance. He went to class and went home. Billy had spent many days in class, his mind drifting, staring at the back of Steve’s head and trying to think about what he would say if he had to talk to Steve again, but everything that came to his head sounded fake and stupid. So he played his part as the asshole at school and stayed quiet and drove his little sister everywhere when he was home.

He pulled into the Hawkins Middle School parking lot, near the entrance to the gym, and parked. He turned off the engine. Max

opened the door, went to get out, and paused. She closed the door again.

“I’m telling Lucas you said sorry,” she said bluntly. “He’s been kind of afraid to ask me out. If he thinks you’re cool with him, I might get to actually go on a date.”

He swallowed, and nodded. In his quiet musings he’d had the realization that Lucas was braver than him, braver than he’d ever be. He had the courage to fight back.

Lucas would be good for her when he was gone.

Max sat, hand on the lever, as though she wanted to say something to him but didn’t know how. For a crazy second he thought about telling her she wouldn’t have to worry about him anymore, but he held his tongue.

“Billy,” she began, unsure.

He looked at her. She leaned over and gave him a hug. It was so brief and awkward that Billy almost thought he had imagined it. She gave him a small, embarrassed smile, and got out of the car.

“Nine thirty!” she yelled to him, slamming the door. He watched her walk into the gym and peered at his watch.

It was 7:30. He had a few hours to kill. He put his head on the steering wheel, wrapping his arms along it, and planned.

He would leave Max his car so that Neil couldn’t sell it on her. He would put it in writing. He knew she’d love to have it, and she already knew how to drive it. She was turning fourteen very soon. The Camaro could sit for a couple years until she got her licence. She’d have a sweet ride for her freshman year of high school. She and her friends would have a lot of fun with it. The thought gave him a little comfort. He wanted to do something nice for her, since he had never done something like that before. At least then someone might remember him with a bit of fondness. He didn’t give a shit about any of his other worldly possessions. They were meaningless and stupid. He thought about the girl he was going to go on a date with. Heather.

She had seemed kind of put out by the fact that he ignored her after he was forced to cancel, but it couldn't be helped. He'd realized that she was a smart and sweet girl, and that he had no business ruining her life too. Maybe he'd leave her a little note, telling her he was still thinking about her, that it wasn't her fault. He really had quite liked her.

He would leave Susan with instructions to leave Neil and get a place of her own with Max, maybe suggest a restraining order. He would leave his father with the guilt and pain – That was easy.

He lifted his head, thinking, putting his chin on his arms.

Steve. He should apologize to Steve.

He nodded to himself, and opened the glove compartment, pulling out a pen and a notepad. He propped them up against the steering wheel and began to write. His note was short, to the point. It didn't need to be any longer. He would leave it on the dashboard of the car.

He leaned back, looking over his little note. This was as good a plan as any. He started his car, looking behind him to back out. Then, as if from nowhere, Steve's BMW came pulling into the parking lot. Billy braked and slammed his car into park. Here it was, his second opportunity. Two apologies in one day— He thought he might be setting a record. The BMW parked and Steve got out. From the passenger's side, the weird looking kid, one of Max's friends, got out too. He was dolled up for his first dance, and from afar, Billy could tell Steve was giving him a little pep talk. Then, with a slap on the back and an encouraging grin, Steve sent the kid off into the school gym.

Billy felt frozen by fear, but steeled his will and got out of the car. Steve was leaning against the hood of the BMW and watching the kid go.

"You got this, Dustin!" he yelled after the kid. The kid spun around and gave him a grin and two thumbs up, and disappeared through the doors.

It was now or never.

Billy walked across the parking lot. Steve had turned around to get back in the car, but caught sight of Billy walking toward him. Billy shoved his hands in his pockets, his head hunched against the fluttering snow. Steve paused, looking more and more apprehensive the closer he got. Billy stopped short in front of him, suddenly realizing that he would actually have to speak to Steve if he wanted to say sorry. Steve leaned against the open door of his car, the metal and glass like a shield between them. Billy couldn't exactly blame him.

"Hey," he said, his voice low. He tried to keep his hands in his pockets to show that he wasn't going to try anything. He desperately wanted a cigarette but he stuffed down the urge. He wanted to look as non-threatening as possible so Steve would stick around to let him speak.

"Hey," Steve greeted, cautious and confused.

"I just wanted to say... I'm sorry," Billy said, the words coming out slow and awkward, but clear nonetheless. He was getting pretty good at this shit.

Steve blinked in surprise. His face looked completely healed now, but the little tidbit Max had told him about him needing a doctor to fix his face floated around in his head and he grimaced.

"Oh— Oh well. Hey, it's fine man. I'm okay," Steve shrugged. His shoulders relaxed a little.

"Max told me I totally fucked up your face," he continued, feeling sick and strange. "I— Shit man, I don't know..."

He gave up and dug out his pack of smokes, lighting one and inhaling deeply.

"Well. It's okay. I'm fine," Steve said.

"Okay."

"See you at school on Monday?"

“Yeah. P.E. See you.”

Steve gave him a small smile and a nod. He waved and got into his car, closing the door. He gave Billy one last look before he drove off. Standing in the cold, shivering, smoking his cigarette, Billy realized his plans had failed before they even began.

Steve was expecting him in class on Monday.

He had to show up.

2. “Cruel Summer” - Bananarama (1984)

July 1st, 1985

“Hey dingus, your children are here!”

Steve, in the back room of Scoops Ahoy, sighed. He leaned forward and opened the plastic partition and stared out at Mike, Will, Lucas, and Max, who were standing at the counter expectantly.

“Again? Seriously?” he demanded, annoyed.

Mike gave him a sheepish look and dinged the bell on the counter. He groaned, rolling his eyes, and gestured. The back room door swung open and they trooped in. He opened the heavy delivery door at the back and peered out into the labyrinth of hallways that wound through the innards of the mall. The coast was clear. He stepped aside and held the door open.

“C’mon, c’mon,” he urged, watching as they strode single file down the hallway. He watched them go, irritated.

“I swear, if anybody hears about this—“ he called.

“We’re dead,” they interrupted in a chorus, not bothering to even look at him.

He watched them as they disappeared around a corner. He put a hand on his hip and sighed tiredly. How had he become such a pushover for a bunch of kids?

“Steve!” Robin called angrily.

He stared into the pipes that ran along the ceiling of the back hallway, the jaunty accordion jingle that pervaded every corner of the store drilling into his skull. How had his life come to this, scooping ice cream at a shopping mall for two and a half dollars an hour? He looked at his wrist and saw that it was eight o’clock. An hour until this hell was over... Only for it to start again at noon sharp tomorrow. He let the delivery door slam shut behind him and stepped out from the back room into the chaotic fray out front. A long line

had formed, extending through the store and out into the mall.

“Strawberry Crunch,” Robin commanded, handing him a metal scoop.

He let out a heavy sigh and did as he was bid, moodily scooping ice cream sloppily into waffle cones and handing them out to the customers waiting. His knuckles grew cold and sticky as they brushed against the frozen tubs. In March of 1985, the Starcourt Mall had opened its doors to the ravenous consumers of Hawkins, the crowds piling in and seeming never to leave. The rejection letters from the colleges he’d applied for weighed heavy in his mind’s eye. He stared down sourly at the tub of Blueberry Blast he was fighting with, his arm halfway into the freezer. He scowled down at the swirls of blue and white, hitting the bottom of the tub. *If Nancy hadn’t borken my fucking heart, I’d be living it up at a college kegger right now* , he thought vindictively. Then he sighed, handing the cone to a customer and reaching behind him for another cone from the dispenser. That wasn’t true... It didn’t even feel cathartic to blame her. The real culprit was the Upside Down. He clenched his jaw, scooping a glob of Chocolate Supreme onto a cone. Above his head, he heard the filaments in the lightbulbs whine and then give out. The jaunty accordion tune that played endlessly and haunted his every waking moment slowed down and then stopped. He lifted his head, looking out at the dark mall, the crowds muttering loudly in surprise. The power must have gone out...

“That’s weird...,” he muttered to himself. A nervous flutter crawled up in his gut. Lights acting strangely didn’t sit well with him anymore. He abandoned the scoop in the tub of ice cream and turned around, flicking the light switch by the door to the back room.

Robin turned and stared at him.

“That isn’t gonna work, dingus,” she said, raising her eyebrows.

“Oh yeah?” he said, giving her a sarcastic pout and flicking the light switch faster, staring her down as he did.

She gave him a long suffering look.

Then, the mall hummed and the lights blinked back on, the fountain

outside coming back to life, the escalators shuddering once and then going on their opposite ways. Steve let his hand fall from the light switch and gave Robin a little smirk.

“Let there be light,” he said, shrugging.

She stared after him, curling her lip. He turned and smirked down at the ice cream, looking sidelong at her. She was leaning against the counter, over the cash register, her eyebrows raised as a mom with three kids listed off an obnoxiously long order. Her nose was kinda cute...

“Steve! Hello! Earth to Steve!”

He started, blinking. A glob of ice cream was half on a cone and half off, falling with a splat back into the tubs.

“Sorry!”

July 2nd, 1985

Billy pushed his aviators up his nose and looked out across the crowded parking lot, scanning every car until he saw a familiar one—A wood-grain station wagon. He ran his tongue across his teeth, satisfied. Mrs. Wheeler was here. He went in a side door to the Hawkins Community Pool, walking through the staff locker rooms and peered up to the clock on the wall. He pulled his whistle over his head and adjusted his hair, catching his profile in a nearby mirror. He fixed his bangs quickly and smirked at himself in the mirror, nodding.

“Afternoon ladies,” he rehearsed quietly.

He admired himself, smirking, and then started, realizing he was forgetting something. He strode quickly to his locker to grab a pack of gum. He didn’t want his breath to smell like old cigarettes when he talked to Mrs. Wheeler today. He popped the package in the pocket of his swim shorts and stood before the staff room door. He flicked his eyes over. Noon, exactly. He licked his lips and adjusted his shoulders.

Showtime.

He opened the staff door as he put his cigarette to his lips, taking one last puff before throwing it away onto the concrete pool deck. He strode forward, his back straight, the humid Indiana sun shining down on his bare chest. A couple of girls walked by him, smiling wide. He licked his lips. Heather strode past him, staring at him past her white ray bans, her curly brown hair bouncing. She looked good. Just past her head, he saw a kid sprinting on the pool deck and furrowed his brow, annoyed. He brought his whistle to his lips and blew, stopping dead in his tracks. The crowd at the Hawkins Community Pool stopped too.

“Hey, lard ass!” he hollered, letting his whistle fall from his lips. “No running on my watch! I gotta warn you again, and you’re banned for life. You wanna be banned for life, lard ass?”

The kid looked scared and sheepish, and shook his head quickly.

“Didn’t think so,” he said, mostly to himself. He brought his whistle back to his lips and blew. The chaos of the pool started up again, kids screaming and splashing. He watched, satisfied, as the kid tiptoed away. Stupid kid. He wasn’t here to patch up skinned knees just cause some dumbass kid was too excited to follow the rules. His Dad would have kicked his ass if he acted the way some of these kids acted at the pool.

He kept walking, strutting by Mrs. Wheeler and her friends, nodding at them.

“Afternoon, ladies.”

“Hi, Billy,” they each chorused back.

He caught Mrs. Wheeler’s eyes and smirked.

“Dig the new suit, Mrs. Wheeler,” he complimented. She was always buying new swimsuits. This one was cut a little higher in the waist, showing off her hips.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice demure and, if he hoped, a little flirtatious. He licked his lips and climbed up on the lifeguard tower.

He looked out across the pool, fiddling with the whistle around his neck, watching the kids play, carefree, screeching and bouncing with excitement. If he was being honest with himself, he was jealous. Every kid under the age of ten had a parent sitting patiently on the pool deck or floating nearby as they swam. The rest of the older kids and teenagers were in groups of close friends, talking, playing, hanging out. Billy didn't have any friends, not really, which was something he'd done on purpose. He'd managed to graduate high school, just barely. In a stupid way, he'd done it for his Mom, even though he hadn't seen her since he was eight. She'd always been really concerned about his schooling, a concern his Dad didn't share. The day after he'd picked up his high school diploma from the school office (he wasn't about to actually go to graduation), he'd walked out into the parking lot and stared long and hard at his Camaro. The urge to jump in it and drive away from Hawkins, never to return, had been so tempting that he'd actually driven two hours outside of the town limits before he'd turned around, swearing softly to himself. He'd barely had ten dollars to his name, and if he really wanted to go back home to California, he'd need way more than that. On a whim he'd applied for a life guarding position at the community pool and gotten it. It was the job he'd done at the beach back home. As the month passed, he found himself enjoying it despite himself. He got to look at hot chicks in swimsuits all day long, and... Teaching the kids to swim was also kinda fun. They loved it when he picked them up and threw them each in the pool at the end of the lessons.

He shifted in his seat on the lifeguard tower and looked toward Mrs. Wheeler, who was standing at the shallow end with her youngest daughter.

He taught Holly and other kids her age swimming lessons on Friday mornings, which was how he and Mrs. Wheeler had reconnected. He looked her over, watching her laugh as she lifted and dunked her little daughter. She was truly a beautiful woman, hotter than a lot of the younger chicks who he'd fooled around with before. He ran his tongue over his teeth, smirking. She looked like she knew a few things... And she looked like she was interested in showing him. After she'd realized where he worked, she and her friends had shown up almost every single day to sunbathe, swim, and (he was pleased to note) stare at him. He'd been meaning to ask her out for a little bit

of fun for almost two weeks now, but he'd needed time to figure it out. She was a smart woman with more experience than him, something which both tantalized him and made him a little apprehensive. He'd thought up different scenarios in his head, different ways he could ask her without being too explicit. He had a feeling she'd be gun shy if he just said it out loud... But he knew there was something between them. He just had to act. He looked out at the rest of the pool goers, smirking.

Today was the day.

"Alrighty, one scoop of chocolate. That's a buck twenty five. Anything else?"

The brunette Steve was serving shook her head. Her friend, who was staring unabashedly at him, licked her ice cream cone. He knew these girls to see them, but couldn't quite recall their names. He looked down at the shirt of the girl he'd given the ice cream to.

"Oh, Purdue! Fancy."

The girl's blonde friend licked her ice cream in a mocking kind of way. She seemed to know exactly who he was and was finding this whole interaction supremely amusing.

"Yup! I'm excited!" the brunette laughed.

"Yeah, you know, I considered it, Purdue, but then I was like, you know what? I really think I need some real life experience, you know, before I hit college, see what it feels like," he said, plunking buttons on the cash register.

The girls exchanged significant looks. He ploughed on.

"Kinda like, I dunno, see what it's like to earn a working-man's wage, you know? Uh..."

The register beeped loudly at him, telling him he'd made a mistake.

"Oh, I'm sorry...," he apologized, trying to fix it quickly. "I think that's, like, really important..."

“Yeah, totally,” the girl said. Her friend looked amused, and he hoped it was because he was funny and charming, and not because she thought he was a total lame ass.

“Yeah, anyways, this was like, so fun,” he said, smiling at her. “We should kind of like, you know, I don’t know, maybe hang out this weekend, or—“

He dropped the change into her hand and missed.

“Oh, sorry about that, uh... I don’t know... Maybe next weekend or —“

“Yeah, I’m busy,” the girl said, smiling at him. Her friend gave him a nasty smile, nodding.

“Oh, that’s cool, I’m— I’m working here next weekend, so... The following weekend’s better for me.”

“No. I’m sorry, I can’t,” the girl said, sounding halfway amused and halfway annoyed. Her friend practically burst out laughing. They walked away.

“I— This is... My first day here...”

They strode away, heads close, laughing loudly.

He let out a heavy sigh.

“And another one bites the dust.” He turned around.

Robin was standing behind the partition, holding up the board she’d drawn up, split into two parts. One side was labeled with YOU ROCK and the other with YOU SUCK. He watched as she drew another mark on the YOU SUCK side, the marker squeaking. He was starting to think that accepting any challenge from Robin was an exercise in loss and humiliation.

“You are oh-for-six, Popeye,” she said. Steve crossed his arms.

“Yeah, yeah, I can count,” he muttered.

“You know that means you suck.”

“Yup, I can read too,” he said, irritated.

“Since when?”

He ignored her.

“It’s this stupid hat,” he groused. “I am telling you, it’s totally blowing my best feature!”

“Yeah, company policy is a real drag...,” she said sarcastically. “You know, it’s a crazy idea, but have you considered... Telling the truth?”

“Oh, you mean, that I couldn’t even get into Tech and my douchebag Dad’s trying to teach me a lesson, I make three bucks an hour, and I have no future? That truth?” he bit, rolling his eyes.

“Hey, twelve o’clock,” she muttered, pointing, looking out into the mall.

“Shit, oh shit...,” he sputtered. “Okay, uh... I’m going in. Oh! And you know what?”

He took the stupid sailor hat off, throwing it to the side.

“Screw company policy.”

“Oh my god, you’re a whole new man,” Robin said sardonically.

“Right?”

He turned around.

“Ahoy, ladies! Didn’t see you there!”

The girl that had walked up to the counter gasped. He hoped it was because she was happy to see him and not ‘cause he’d scared the shit out of her.

“Would you guys like to set sail on this ocean of flavour with me? I’ll be your captain. I’m Steve Harrington.”

“Oh, God,” the girl muttered under her breath, her eyes wide, her teeth bared in an uncomfortable smile. Behind her, three other girls snorted with laughter.

“Can I get you guys a little taste of the Cherries Jubilee? No? Anybody? Banana boat? Four people, four spoons? Share it in a booth? Anybody? It’s hot out there...”

He heard Robin make a noise of disgust in her throat behind him.

Inevitably, four girls walked away with ice cream and he turned around without any of their phone numbers. Robin gave him a wince and showed him the board, which read 0-7. He groaned, putting his head in his hand. He had no idea what was wrong with him. Surely not every girl who had graduated in his year was going off to college? There had to be some chicks who still wanted a date with Steve ‘The Hair’ Harrington... Right?

He looked up at Robin, who had this little shit eating grin smirk on her face as she slid herself through the partition and across the counter, landing with both sneakers on the floor and giving him a shrug.

He was doomed...

Billy watched Karen do laps, her toned arms swinging over her head, her flawless legs kicking the water. He took off his aviators for a better look, smirking to himself. He brought his whistle to his lips and blew, not even bothering to look at the crowds of people that jumped into the water at his signal. He saw her getting out of the pool and got down for the end of his shift, walking toward her, grabbing her towel from her chair.

“Looking good out there, Mrs. Wheeler,” he complimented, trying to stop himself from grinning like an idiot, his lips quirking.

“Thank you,” she smiled, her voice breathy. He handed her her towel.

“Perfect form,” he said, bringing his voice lower.

“Well...,” she said, like he’d caught her a little off guard. “Your form is amazing.”

He laughed, turning his head so she would know that he’d caught on to her unintentional double entendre. She quickly corrected herself, embarrassed.

“I’m sorry, I mean, I... I’ve seen you... Uh, teaching... Lessons, swimming lessons.”

He chuckled. He was gonna go for it.

“You know, I could, uh...”

He looked at her, his eyes half lidded. “I could teach you, if you like.”

“Oh,” she said, holding her towel to herself, eyeing him.

“I know all the styles. Freestyle...”

He stepped forward.

“Butterfly.”

He blinked his baby blue eyes at her, bringing his whistle to his lips.

“Breast stroke.”

She looked like he’d made her short circuit, and she dropped her towel. They both bent to retrieve it from the pool deck.

“You okay?” he asked her.

“I didn’t think you... I didn’t think you taught adults.”

“Well, I offer more, uh...”

He looked right at her, smirking.

“Advanced lessons to… Select clientele.”

He leaned in, turning his head away from the families swimming in

the pool.

“Come to think of it, there is a good pool out at uh, Motel 6 on Cornwallis. It’s very quiet. You know, very private…”

“Mm.”

“Shall we say tonight?” he asked her, his voice low. “Eight o’clock?”

“I’m sorry…” she said, looking thrilled and terrified. “I can’t.”

“Can’t what? Have fun?”

He looked away, smiling. She knew what he was talking about.

“Mrs. Wheeler!” he teased, flicking his gum along his tongue.

“No,” she laughed, preening. “I just, uh… I don’t think I need any lessons.”

He loved this little game they were playing. She probably didn’t need any lessons, but he played along.

“See, I think you do… I just don’t think that you’ve had the right teacher.”

“I, uh…” she stuttered.

He leaned in.

“It will be… The workout of your life.”

He flicked his eyes down her body. She looked down and then back up at him, her eyes half hooded, a little smirk on her lips. He smiled back triumphantly.

Billy flew down Cherry Oak drive, his engines roaring, blasting music, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. He pulled out onto the circuit road that passed by old steelworks factories and warehouses on the edge of Hawkins, headed toward Cornwallis and Mrs. Wheeler’s gorgeous body. He smirked. He looked in his rear

view mirror and practiced his warmest, most charming laugh. Nobody had ever taught him how to be charming so he'd had to learn it on his own. He found that people tended to like him better if he made sure to get how he was gonna act right before he met them. He adjusted the rear view mirror and looked at himself in it.

"Hey Karen," he said. He paused, thinking.

"Don't mind if I call you Karen, do you?" he continued. That was good. First name basis...

He laughed.

"Good—"

Something smashed into his windshield.

He startled, terrified, swinging the steering wheel around, the tires of his Camaro screeching as he careened off the road. He spun one way and then the other. He finally came to a stop as the car smashed into the side of a building, rocking. He cried out in pain. He slowly lifted his head, disoriented, his eyes unfocused. He blinked, his brain catching up, seeing the massive crack in the windshield and hearing the hiss of his engine.

"Oh, no," he muttered, his gut sinking, smacking the dashboard of the Camaro. "No! Piece of shit!"

He groaned, wincing, noticing the cut on his forehead for the first time. He put a finger to the wound and it came away with blood.

"Shit..."

He smacked his hands against the steering wheel furiously.

"Damn it!"

He got out of the car, staggering around to the passenger's side door, which was dented severely. He tried to pull it open but it wouldn't budge. He hit it.

"Damn it! Piece of shit!" he swore, giving it a kick. His Dad was

gonna kill him...

He stalked to the front of the car, slamming the door, and peered at the windshield. There was something at the centre of the cracked glass that webbed out like spider silk from the point of impact, something sludgy and strange.

“What the hell?”

He looked down at it, something tickling at the back of his mind. It was bizarrely cold, and smelled... It smelled like rot, like fungus, like death... It was... Familiar...

He startled, spinning around as something crashed through the bushes behind him. He straightened, his eyes flicking around. Something was breathing in the darkness, a death rattle creaking in the empty night. A flare of fear clawed up through his chest as he stared out into the nothingness. The never ending trees lurked outside the line of silver beaming down from an old floodlight attached to the side of the abandoned warehouse.

“Who’s there?” he called out.

Nothing. The trees barely moved in the humid breeze.

“Hey! I said who’s there—“

Something grabbed his ankle.

He fell to the ground, onto his belly. A piercingly cold something was dragging him through the rough gravel. He screamed in terror, scrabbling at the unforgiving sharp stones. He collided with the metal side of the building and was swung around, pulled through the open maw of the abandoned warehouse. His hands scrabbled at filthy, dusty metal flooring. Then, he felt stairs against his thighs. He grabbed the doorframe, holding on with all his might, screaming so loudly his voice crackled. The thing holding onto his ankle pulled once, hard, and his hands broke free of the door frame. He slid down, down, down into the inky dark. Finally, he stopped. His nose was pressed against the cold floor, and he smelled it, that evil and foreboding stench, so strong he almost gagged. His mind flashed to a

house in the middle of the woods, papered in strange, disturbing drawings of dark tunnels. He gasped, trying to get air into his lungs. Then he heard a trill, a horrific and unearthly sound, and flipped over onto his back. He looked up.

His mouth opened wide and he wailed.

July 3rd, 1985

Steve swore as he lifted his hand from the back room freezer, flicking it, wincing. He'd caught his fingers in it… Again. He sucked his finger and stepped back, annoyed. *Goddammit!*

"Is he here?"

"Is who here?" Robin asked. He perked up at the familiar voice. Dustin! He burst out of the back room.

"Henderson!" he greeted jovially, jumping up and down and moving from behind the counter. "Henderson! He's back!" he crowed, greeting him. "He's back!"

"I'm back! You got the job!"

"I got the job!" he hollered, imitating a trumpet and the jaunty tune that played relentlessly over the speakers. "Hey!"

They slapped hands, bumped fists, pretended to fight with lightsabers, and Dustin mimed stabbing Steve in the guts. He groaned loudly, pretending his innards were falling out onto the floor of Scoops Ahoy. In the time that Steve had been socially irrelevant (which was to say the entirety of his last year of high school), he had spent a lot of time with Dustin. He was kind of like his little brother and protege all mixed into one short curly-haired package. He was a really good kid— Way better than he'd been at his age, that's for sure.

"How many children are you friends with?" Robin asked, leaning over the counter, a sarcastic smirk on her face. He looked at her and sighed, gesturing to her.

A few minutes later found Dustin digging into a Banana Boat Supreme.

“Think Phoebe Cates but hotter,” Dustin said through a mouthful of ice cream.

“No, no, no way. Hotter than Phoebe Cates? No.”

“Mmhmm,” Dustin said, disagreeing. “Brilliant, too. And she doesn’t even care that my real pearls are still coming in. She says kissing is better without teeth.”

Steve smiled at him, his eyebrows raised, nodding uncomfortably. He blinked, shaking his head, trying to find something supportive to say.

“Wow. Yeah. That’s great. Proud of you man. That’s... That’s kinda romantic...”

“So do you really just get to eat as much of this as you want?” Dustin asked.

“Yeah, I mean, sure. It’s not really a good idea for me, though, y’know, I gotta keep in shape for the ladies.”

“Yeah, and how is that working out for you?” Robin called, grinning, cleaning up the trash area.

“Ignore her,” Steve interjected bluntly. Goddammit, Robin...

“She seems cool,” Dustin observed.

“She’s not,” he said flatly, shifting. Robin was totally not his type… Even if she did have a cute nose… And even if he had a really good time with her. She was really funny. “So, where are the other knuckleheads?”

“They ditched me yesterday,” Dustin said.

Steve furrowed his brow. “No...”

Dustin nodded. “Mhm. My first day back. You believe that shit?”

“Woah, seriously?” Steve asked, leaning forward, his brow quirking. He had seen them all getting moodier and acting more and more like little shitheads from afar, but he hadn’t expected them to act like this.

"I swear to God. Mm. They’re gonna regret it though, big time, when they don’t get to share in my glory.”

“Glory? What glory?”

Dustin shuffled in closer, bringing his voice down.

“So, last night, we’re trying to get in contact with Suzie... And, uh...”

Dustin looked around the ice cream parlour conspiratorially.

He whispered something, hiding his mouth.

“What?” Steve asked.

He mumbled again, half hiding his mouth. Steve couldn't hear a fucking word he was saying. “Just speak louder!”

“I intercepted a secret Russian communication!”

A few people turned around and stared at them. Steve leaned down.

“Jeez, shh! Yeah okay, that’s what I thought you said,” Steve said hastily. He blinked, folding his hands together. “Wait, what does that mean?”

"It means, Steve, that we could be heroes. True American heroes.”

“Huh!”

“Mm hmm!”

“American heroes!” Steve grinned.

“Just think, you could have all the ladies you want and more,” Dustin said, gesturing out into the mall.

“More?”

“More,” Dustin agreed.

“I like more,” Steve said, nodding, imagining the possibilities. It had been... A long time. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch, I just need your help.”

“With what?”

Dustin unzipped his backpack and pulled out a worn book. The cover read ‘Romanov’s Russian-English / English-Russian Dictionary.’

“Translation.”

Billy’s eyes flickered between the darkness and the world that was familiar to him, disappearing and reappearing, like a fading light. He drove with shaking hands, staggered across the parking lot... Was that the parking lot? Dark tendrils crept along the ground and he jumped away from them, but when he opened his eyes again they were gone, only cracked pavement and the relentless sun... The sun... It burned him... He closed his eyes and when he opened them, he had poison on his tongue, his hand holding a bottle of chlorine. He heard his name. Something was taking over him, like a sickness, like a fever, like a rot. He recognized the voice. It was Mrs. Wheeler. It was Karen. Something whispered horrors, a parasite that made his hands itch. He slammed her head against the shelf. He exhaled sharply. Was she lying there? Had he done it?

“Billy?”

He let out a breath and thought of little Holly swimming in the pool just beyond the gate. He felt the rot stirring in his brain, like a blanket covering his eyes, and he forced himself to speak.

“Stay away from me, Karen.”

His voice was alien, void of emotion. Had he ever been able to speak? He walked away, away from Karen Wheeler. He needed to warn her. He needed to protect her... He wanted her to stay far away from him. He felt his mind slipping, falling... The Thing that stirred in him

wanted death, wanted bodies... He wouldn't take a Mom away from another little kid... He wouldn't... He walked out into the sunshine. He felt pain... The heat was unbearable... The noise was so loud... People talked to him from faraway planets... He staggered up onto the lifeguard tower, looking up into the cruel sun.

He saw a beach... He closed his eyes.

"What do you want?" his mind echoed.

His shadow spoke back.

"To build. I want you to build."

"To build what?" he asked.

"What you see."

"I don't understand..."

He heard a thunderclap and the dark place was gone. He heard crickets in the ditch beside the road.

"I don't understand!" he yelled in the night. His heart ran in his chest like a trapped rat. He turned around, looking for his twin, but it was nowhere. "What do you mean? I don't understand!" he wailed.

He opened his eyes, staggering down from the lifeguard tower. His arm was on fire. When he looked, he saw that it was burned, like his flesh had been pressed against a flame. He couldn't bear the heat. He heard his name. He stumbled into the shade of the locker rooms. He slapped the shower dial... Ice cold water... Relief... He looked down at his arm. Something was inside him... Something was there... He needed it out, he needed it gone, he needed to rip it out...

He touched it.

A knife coursed through his mind. He yelled in agony, clutching his head, staggering down to his knees.

"Billy?"

He saw her, through the water. Heather.

“Take me to him.”

His mind slipped. The shadow moved in. He was too tired to stop it... He heard seagulls... He followed footsteps in the sand, the waves tickling his feet... Billy heard distant screaming.

He saw a flicker.

A girl.

He stared at her. Then she was gone.

He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he was lying in his clothes on top of his bed, clutching a lifeguard whistle.

It was stained with blood.

Billy ran his fingers down the handwritten list of the numbers of his coworkers at the pool. He was shaking uncontrollably, sitting in his shorts and t-shirt in the bathtub, ice packs floating around him. He wasn’t cold enough... Nothing was cold enough... *We need cold—*

He squeezed his eyes shut, gasping. He opened them and found Heather’s number. He’d dragged the phone into the bathroom and slammed the door, the cord taught against the floor. He picked up the receiver and leaned over the side of the tub, dialling her number with stained fingers. It rang two times before someone picked up.

“Hello?”

Billy opened and closed his mouth, forgetting how to speak.

“Hello,” he croaked.

“Who is this?” the woman asked.

“It’s— It’s Billy, from the pool. Is Heather there?”

“She is, but she’s not feeling well today— Oh, here she is.”

There was shuffling behind the line.

“Okay, thanks Mom...” he heard Heather say.

His heart exploded with relief. She was alive. He hadn’t done anything to her...

“Heather? Heather? It’s me, it’s Billy, oh God—“

"We want you to come to this place, this evening at seven. We will take the parents.”

Billy stilled.

“Yes, ” he said.

Billy saw a face, red hair, familiar to him. She was standing far ahead on the beach, wearing a yellow raincoat, her hair slicked with water. His lips moved.

“Max,” he said.

He needed to hide her. He kept his eyes wide open, steering the hand, reasoning with the whispers.

We will get the mother and the father , he told them. *We will get the mother and the father.* His body moved for him, used his tongue. He saw Heather looking, or what used to be Heather. Was she still there? His mind flickered. He was losing time.

“Do you girls want a cookie? They’re fresh out of the oven?”

They said no— Thank God, they said no. *Don’t stay, don’t stay, go away...*

He watched them leave. He turned away, looking out across the waves crashing over the sand.

He saw his Mom in the distance. He had his surfboard under his arm.

He called to her.

We open our eyes. Our skin is burning. The sun is burning us. We stand and go to the bathroom, running the tap, icy cold. We strip the clothes from our flesh and sit in the frigid water. We are relieved. We see the blood on the vanity and we are pleased. So many of us now. Billy sighed. Something inky dark drowned his thoughts and he got out of the bath tub. It told him he needed to be protected from the sun, so he dressed, wearing a long sleeve shirt. He knew it was just trying to keep him alive, this thing that lived in his dreams. We are safe when we are in darkness. He drove to the pool. He hated the sun. He had always hated the sun. It made our flesh burn. He was starving. When no one was looking, he drank from the tubs of chlorine and other chemicals. The chemicals helped us thrive, and Billy wanted us to thrive, to live.

He did his job. He watched the flesh move in the water, full of hot blood and other strange things. Some man yelled at us for not coming in to work, and we thought how useful he would be to us. He saw so much flesh every day, useful young flesh— We would remember him. Our shift ended at the water where the flesh screamed. We ran an icy cold shower. We love the cold water— It makes us feel like we are home, back in the dark place. We revel in the freezing cold. Flesh is so sensitive. We look down at our fingers and our arms and watch strange bumps appear. We leave the cold water and we put our dressings on. We pull up our jeans.

A noise.

Nobody is supposed to be in the water place at this time. We learned that from this one's memories.

"Pool's closed."

Clang.

"Hey. Do you hear me? Pool is closed!"

We must find the intruders. They will be easy to take. It is night and there is no one around. We can move freely. No one will suspect. The light is gone from the sky.

“Billy...” *someone calls. T hey have found out about us.*

“Who’s there?”

We must kill them.

“Billy! Billy!” the voice mocked.

“You think this is funny, huh?”

“Come find me!” the voice laughed.

“I find you, it is your funeral.” *He wasn't a liar.*

“Come and get me! Come on!”

“Got you.” *We are filled with joy. More flesh for the taking. We see a figure. We take them by the neck.*

Something is wrong about this flesh. A voice speaks through a box.

“Hey. Behind you.”

We turn. The Girl is there.

“Hi.”

We are flung against the wall... We flicker and fade... We fling ourselves up, but the flesh has locked us in. We look out. There is a girl. She has red hair. Billy stares at her. He can’t move. He manages to speak.

“Max.”

“Do it,” *she says.*

The darkness uses his voice.

"You think this is funny? You think this is some kind of sick prank, huh?”

Billy hates this thing, this thing that talks for him, that uses his voice... How dare it?

He spits at the window.

“You little shits think this is funny? What is this? Open the door!”

The creature was panicking.

“Open the door! Open the door! OPEN THE GODDAMN DOOR!”

The body fell to the ground and the creature hollered. Billy grabbed it, pushed back, tore it away from his eyes, his tongue, his limbs. It was gone… It was gone… It couldn’t handle the heat… He was alive…

He sobbed.

“It’s not my fault,” he moaned. “It’s not my fault, Max… It’s not my fault… I promise you, it’s not my fault…”

He got on his knees, put his palms together. Her face appeared at the window to the sauna.

“What’s not your fault, Billy?”

“I’ve done things, Max. Really… Bad things. I didn’t mean to… He made me do it…"

“Who made you do it?”

“I don’t know, it’s like a shadow… Like a giant shadow… Please Max,” he begged.

“What did he make you do?” she asked, her voice quaking.

“It’s not my fault, okay? Max, please!” he begged her, falling onto his side against the bench. “Please! Please believe me, Max, it’s not my fault…” he wailed. “I tried to stop him, okay, I did…”

The creature was coming back. He felt sick. With the last vestiges of his flickering consciousness, he begged her. He needed her to know that he hadn’t meant to do the things he had done. He needed her to know he had tried.

“Please believe me, Max… Please believe me… Please believe me…”

“It’s gonna be okay,” she said, afraid. “It’s gonna be okay. We want to help you...”

“Max, please...” he moaned.

Go away, go away, run away, run away!

“I believe you Billy...”

He was relieved. She believed him.

Billy felt his hand moving on its own, reaching for a piece of rubble.

He heard seagulls, and turned his head. He saw beautiful water and a long, endless sand. Billy grabbed his surf board, laughing excitedly, his Mom cheering on the beach, his wet hair blowing in the wind.

July 4th, 1985

“Help!” Robin hollered. “Help!”

“Hey, would you stop yelling?”

“Steve! Oh my god, Steve!” Robin gasped, panting in relief. She leaned her head back. “Are... Are you okay?”

“My ears are ringing, and I can’t really breathe, my eye feels like it’s about to pop out of my skull, but, you know, apart from that, I’m doing pretty good.”

“Well, the good news is that they’re calling you a doctor,” Robin chuckled hysterically, her voice ironic.

Steve lifted his heavy head and looked around.

“Is this his place of work? I love the vibe... Charming...”

“Yeah, tell me about it. So, okay, do you see that table over there to your right?”

Steve looked over, and saw nothing.

“No, your other right.”

“Oh.” He turned the other way.

“Yeah, okay. And do you see those scissors?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Yeah, well, I think that if we move at the same time, we could get over there, and then maybe I could kick the table and knock them into your lap.”

“And I could cut the binds.”

“Yeah, and we could get out of here.”

“Gotcha. Okay, yeah, we can do that.”

“Yeah!”

“Those morons, they left scissors in here?”

“Yeah, morons.”

“Total morons.”

“Okay— So. On the count of three, we’re gonna hop.”

“Okay, good, hop on three. I gotcha.”

“Alright. One. Two. Three.”

They hopped.

“Okay, that worked!” Robin laughed, her voice high. “Let’s try again!”

“One. Two. Three.”

They hopped.

“Holy shit, this is gonna work! Ready?”

“One. Two. Three!”

They hopped. One of the chair legs moved and they toppled painfully to the floor. They both cried out in pain. Against his back, he felt Robin’s chest heaving and a small sniffling.

“It’s okay,” he croaked. He felt hopeless. They were gonna die in here. “Don’t cry, Robin...”

He felt so stupid. Why had he let her help them translate? He knew what kind of luck he had regarding things that normal folks would never have to deal with in their entire lives... Why did he drag her into this? Robin suddenly squeaked, giggling.

“Are you laughing?” Steve asked, amazed. She burst out into cackling.

“Yeah.”

“Jesus...,” Steve swore, laying his head on the blessedly cold floor.

“I’m sorry!” she cackled. “I’m so sorry, it’s just... I can’t believe... I’m gonna die in a secret Russian base with Steve ‘The Hair’ Harrington. It’s just too trippy, man!”

“We’re not gonna die,” he protested. “We’re gonna get out of here, okay? Just— You gotta just lemme think for a second...”

Robin paused. Then, she spoke, her voice soft.

“Do you remember, um... Do you remember Mrs. Click’s sophomore history class?”

Steve shook his head. “What?”

“Mrs. Clickitty-Clackitty. That’s what us band dweebs called her.”

Steve winced, feeling like he was going to cry, putting his head on the floor. Robin wouldn’t bring up school unless she was sure they were going to die. He didn’t know how to convince himself that they were gonna live, much less her, so he stayed quiet, swallowing the blood that pooled thickly in his swollen mouth, furious that he had

endangered her in the first place.

“It was first period, Tuesdays and Thursdays, so you were always late. And you always had the same breakfast. Bacon, egg, and cheese on a sesame bagel. I sat behind you, two days a week for a year.”

Steve’s gut sank.

“Mister Funny...,” Robin continued. “Mister Cool. The King of Hawkins High himself. Do you even remember me from that class?”

He had never even noticed. Robin let out a little laugh. “Of course you don’t. You were a real asshole, you know that?”

“Yeah, I know,” Steve croaked quietly.

“But it didn’t even matter. It didn’t even matter that you were an ass. I was still... Obsessed with you.”

Steve closed his eyes, pained.

“Even though all of us losers pretend to be above it all, we still just wanna be popular... Accepted... Normal.”

Steve thought about Tommy. He had loved Tommy once, like a brother. He would have done anything for him. It had stung to know his feelings weren’t returned, that Tommy had disliked him the second he'd tried to be something other than a shallow dickhead.

“If it makes you feel any better, having those things isn’t all that great.” He sniffed, trying to clear the blood from his nose and sighing. “Seriously. It just baffles me. Everything that people tell you is important, everything that people say you should care about, it’s all just...”

Nancy’s drunken face swam into his mind’s eye. He chuckled. “Bullshit.”

“But I guess you gotta mess up to figure things out, right?”

“I hope so,” Robin said, her voice tickling the edges of a laugh. “I feel like my whole life has been... One big error.”

Steve chuckled. “Yep.”

“At least it can’t get any more messed up than this,” she giggled.

“You know, I wish I’d known you in Click’s class,” Steve said.

“Yeah?”

“Really, I do. Maybe you could’ve helped me pass the class... Maybe instead of being here I’d be on my way to college right now.”

“And I would have no idea that there were evil Russians beneath our feet, and I would be happily slinging ice cream with some other shmuck.”

Steve chuckled softly.

“Gotta say, though. I liked being your shmuck,” he confessed. “It was fun while it lasted.”

"It was,” she agreed.

The door buzzed and they both looked up. Fear twinged through Steve’s heart. They were painfully put upright.

“Where were you two going?” the Russian general mocked. “Try telling the truth this time. It will make your visit with Dr. Zharkov less painful.”

A doctor in a long white coat approached them, holding some kind of gun equipped with a strange blue chamber holding a dubious liquid.

“Wait, wait, wait! What is that thing?” Steve yelled.

“It will help you talk,” the doctor said, smiling.

“Did you even clean that thing— Agh! AGHHHHH!”

Someone took his hand.

“Billy. Can you hear me? I want to see. I want to see what happened.”

He looked up.

It was The Girl. The thing grabbed her wrist, but he wouldn't let it hurt her. He made it let go. He would hide her.

He let her in.

Billy grabbed his surf board, laughing excitedly, his Mom cheering on the beach, his wet hair blowing in the wind. He left it on the sand and ran to her.

"Did you see that?" he asked her.

"Yeah, I did!"

"That was at least seven feet!"

"I don't know what it was, but it almost gave me a heart attack!" his Mom called back, kissing him on the head. She put her hand on his shoulder.

"Ten more minutes?" he asked.

"Yeah, okay, ten more minutes," she agreed."But any longer than that, Dad's gonna be mad, okay?"

"Okay!"

"Billy?" his Mom called.

He looked around.

"Watch out for rip currents!"

"I know!"

He paddled out into the sea.

Steve felt great. He felt… Awesome.

"Honestly, I don't really feel anything," he observed mildly. "Do you?"

“I mean, I... I feel fine,” Robin said, strapped to the chair behind him. “I feel normal.”

“Yeah, I feel... I feel fine,” Steve chuckled. “I kinda... Feel good.”

His tongue felt kinda loose. Oh well. He started to laugh. Robin laughed too.

“Wanna know a secret?” Robin said, laying the back of her head on his shoulder.

“What?”

“I like it, too!”

He laughed.

“Morons, they messed up the drug!” Steve mumbled, grinning. Even his brutalized face didn’t hurt as bad.

“They messed it up!”

“Morons!”

"Hey morons!”

“Woah!” Steve yelled, his eyes wide. Had this place always been patterned with rubber ducks?

“Something is definitely wrong with us,” Robin said gleefully.

“Something’s wrong...,” Steve agreed. Oh, now the floor was covered in orange triangles. Cool! He heard the buzzing of the door and turned around, staring at the Soviet General as he walked in with the doctor and a few guards.

“Would now be a good time to tell you I don’t like doctors?” Robin said. The doctor was unloading shiny metal instruments of increasingly alarming sharpness onto a metal tray. The doctor was also a bear. Wait… What? That’s crazy… Why would they hire a bear as a doctor?

“Let’s try this, again,” the General said.

“Mmhm!” Steve agreed. He felt so amazingly happy to tell him, for the hundredth time, that he was just some dumb asshole who worked for minimum wage and had quite easily broken both their codes and their defences.

"Who do you work for?"

“Scoops,” he repeated. “Scoops Ahoy.” Behind him, Robin wheezed. The General’s shoes were a really nice red... Blue... Red... Blue… Red… Yellow?

“How did you find us?” the General asked coldly.

“Totally by accident,” Steve admitted, chuckling.

The General said something angrily in Russian. The bear doctor picked up a shiny and terrifying instrument from his tray.

“What is that shiny little toy?” Steve asked him.

“What’re you gonna do with that, doc?” Robin said.

The instrument dug into his fingernail.

“WOAH, woah! Wait! Wait!” he squealed.

“There was a code. We heard a code!” Robin yelled. The doctor stopped, the metal instrument clamped to his nail.

“Code? What code?” the General demanded, striding to stand in front of her.

“ *‘The week is long, the silvery cat frets when blue meets yellow in the west’* , Blah blah blah... You broadcast that stupid spy shit all over town, and we picked it up on our Cerebro, and we cracked it in a day. A day! You think you’re so smart, but a couple of kids who—“

She cackled.

“Who scoop ice cream for a living, cracked your code in a day, and

now, people know you're here."

"Who knows we are here, cyka?" spat the General.

"Oh, well Dustin knows..." Steve interjected enthusiastically. He loved how Robin was telling this story... It was such a good story!

"Hey, Steve?" Robin interrupted.

"Yeah, Dustin Henderson, he knows."

"Steve!"

"Dustin Henderson," the General repeated in satisfaction. "It is your small, curly-haired friend?"

"Oh, curly-haired. Great hair. Small. Kind of like a 'fro, yeah," Steve agreed, happily. Dustin really was coming into his looks. He was really proud of him. The General's hat was bright orange now, and you know what? It was totally his colour.

"Where is he?" the General demanded.

"Oh, he's long gone, you big asshole," Steve chuckled. "And he's probably calling Hopper, and Hopper's calling the U.S. Cavalry... They're gonna come in here, commando-style, guns a-blazin', and kick your sorry asses back to Russia. You're gonna be two pieces of toast."

He wheezed with laughter, Robin squeaking in giggles behind him. Poor guy. This General was having a bad day... His boss was gonna be so pissed. He tried to remember if it was still Andropov... Or Brezhnev... Or... Man, this guy had intense eyes... They were kinda nice. He hoped he had a wife back in the USSR. It'd be such a waste if he didn't with eyes like that.

"Is that so?" the General asked, leaning down, his voice low and intense. As a negative, the General's breath was really bad. It kinda ruined how nice his eyes were.

"Yeah," Steve shrugged. He cackled.

The doctor and the General laughed like it was a joke. Then, a klaxon alarm sounded through the room, the lights flickering.

The General's face fell. Steve looked at him, still smiling. He shrugged.

They strode out of the room.

A few seconds later, Dustin appeared out of nowhere and stabbed the Doctor in the chest with a rod that crackled loudly with electricity. Steve blinked several times, amazed. Holy shit! He'd made a lightsabre… Man, that kid was a smart cookie!

"Hey! Henderson!" he greeted happily. "That's crazy, I was just talking about you!"

"Get ready to run!"

A seagull cried and he turned around.

Billy could see The Girl. She was terrified, backing away from him. He felt his lips moving, a voice that wasn't his own warbling through his throat.

"Mike!"

"He can't hear you."

He stepped forward.

"You shouldn't have looked for me... Because now I see you. We can all see you."

She stepped back, tears in her eyes.

"You... Let us in. And now you are going to have to let us stay. Don't you see? All this time... We've been building it. We've been building it... For you."

The Girl sobbed.

"All that work... All that pain... For you. And now it's time... Time to end

it. And we're going to end you. And when you are gone, we are going to end your friends. And then we are going to end... Everyone."

He cried, a tear flicking down his cheek as the darkness spoke. He was too weak to fight it. He wanted to reach for The Girl but his body wasn't his own. In shame and terror he felt himself drift, smelling salt air, feeling sand beneath his bare toes...

Billy grabbed his surf board, laughing excitedly, his Mom cheering on the beach, his wet hair blowing in the wind. As he ran, he felt a tear sliding down his cheek and he wiped it, brushing it away. There was no reason to cry in this place.

He was happy here.

The white hallways flickered by and Steve giggled loudly, Erica and Dustin dragging him. They came out into the hallway of the movie theatre and he followed the rest as they went toward the showing. He saw a bag of popcorn sticking out of a trash can and grabbed it. Sweet! Free popcorn! Who the hell would throw perfectly good popcorn out? Such a waste... Dustin led them down into the theatre and pointed at seats.

"These are too close!" Robin protested.

"Yeah, these seats blow!" he agreed.

"Then don't watch the movie!" Dustin hissed.

"We wanna watch it!"

"Then don't watch it!" Dustin yelled angrily.

Someone in the row behind shushed them angrily.

"Sorry!" Dustin said. He leaned down and whispered. "Whatever you do... Don't. Go. Anywhere."

"Fine, Dad!" Steve said. Man, Dustin was really acting like a dickhead. Everything was cool! He had his popcorn! Maybe if he stopped wearing that ugly purple fur vest he'd feel better... He and

Robin laughed. Steve's eyes wandered to the screen and his mouth dropped. Holy shit... This movie... It was incredible. Was it beautiful, even? Probably... He ate some popcorn.

His stomach hurt. This movie was good but... He needed water.

"C'mon," he mumbled, swatting Robin. "I'm... I gotta get something to drink..."

"Yeah," she said, her brow furrowed. "Yeah, I'm... I'm thirsty..."

They stumbled out of the theatre, holding each other for dear life. Steve found a water fountain and dunked his face into it, slamming the button. Oh, fuck yeah... Was this water better than sex? Oh, definitely... God, it was nice. He gulped sloppily.

"That's amazing," he said, swallowing heavily.

"So, I totally wasn't focused in there or anything, but... I'm pretty sure... That mom was trying to bang her son," Robin said thoughtfully.

"Wait, wait, wait, the hot chick was Alex P. Keaton's mom?" Steve asked, amazed.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure..."

"But they're the same age," Steve mumbled, going in for more water.

"No, but, he went back in time."

Steve snorted. "Then why is it called Back to the Future?"

"He has to go back to the future because he's in the past. So, the future is actually the present, which is his time."

Steve stared out into space.

"Wh—what?"

Robin shoved him away from the water fountain.

"It's my turn, you've had enough!"

Steve wandered out into the hall, staring up into the ceiling. The lights above flickered like stars. They were so beautiful...

"Wow..."

They glittered and spun. It reminded him of the stars shining over the lake at his Grandpa's house out in the woods. He was even swaying like he was on a canoe... Robin had to see this.

"Hey, Robin... You gotta check this out."

She joined him, staring up.

“Check this ceiling... It’s beautiful...”

“Oh, wow.”

Then the ceiling started to heave, swirling, coming in and out of focus. He gulped down something hot and disgusting rising in his throat. Oh no... They sprinted, scrabbling at each other, bursting through the nearest bathroom door and into two separate stalls. He fell to his knees and vomited. He puked so long he thought he might have seen yesterday’s breakfast floating in the toilet bowl. Eventually, there was nothing left to vomit and he flushed the toilet, leaning back against the tiled back of the stall, exhausted. He felt more clear headed, but the lights in the room were overly bright, like someone had overworked a breaker.

“The ceiling stopped spinning for me,” Robin informed him. “Is it still spinning for you?”

He looked up.

“Holy shit. No... You think we puked it all up?”

“Maybe. Ask me something,” Robin said. She affected a Russian accent. “Interrogate me.”

“Okay. Interrogate you. Sure. Um... When was the last time you, uh... Peed your pants?”

“Today,” Robin said.

“What?”

“When the Russian doctor took out the bone saw,” she admitted.

“Oh, my God,” Steve laughed.

She turned to him, grinning, lying on the floor with her feet propped up in the air, pinching her fingers together. “It was just a little bit though...”

“Yeah, it’s definitely still in her system...,” he chuckled to himself, rubbing his forehead.

“Alright. My turn.”

“Okay. Hit me.”

“Have you... Ever been in love?”

Steve swallowed.

“Yep. Nancy Wheeler. First semester, senior year.” He imitated shooting himself in the chest where his heart was.

“Oh my god,” Robin said sarcastically. “She’s such a priss.”

He hummed. “Turns out, not really.”

Robin scoffed. “Are you still in love with Nancy?”

He looked over to the side of the bathroom stall, as if he could see Robin through it.

“No,” he said.

“Why not?”

Steve clicked his tongue against his teeth. They had survived a secret Russian base together... He might as well tell her how comfortable and how happy she made him feel.

“I think it’s because I found someone who’s a little bit better for me,” he said, shrugging and chuckling. “It’s crazy. Ever since Dustin got

home he's been saying, you know, 'You gotta find your Suzy, you gotta find your Suzy.'"

"Wait, who's Suzy?"

"It's some girl from camp, I guess his girlfriend," Steve explained, sighing heavily. "To be honest, I'm not 100% sure she's even real. But that's not— That's not really the point. The point is, this girl, you know, the one that I like... It's somebody that I... Didn't even talk to in school. And I don't even know why. Maybe 'cause Tommy H. would've made fun of me, or... I wouldn't be... Prom King?"

He shook his head.

"It's stupid. I mean, Dustin's right, it's all just a bunch of bullshit anyways. Because when I think about it, I should've been hanging out with this girl the whole time. First of all— She's hilarious. She's so funny. I feel like this summer, I have laughed harder than I have laughed... In a really long time. And she's smart. Way smarter than me. You know..."

Steve licked his lips.

"She can crack, like, top secret Russian codes, and... You know? She's honestly unlike anyone I've ever even met before."

Nothing but silence reigned in the bathroom, the fluorescent lights humming softly, the fan above their heads spinning. Usually, when he divulged his heart like this, girls didn't stay silent...

"Robin?" he called. He tapped on the stall, concerned. "Robin did you just OD in there?"

"No," she sighed breathily, her voice trembling. "I am... Still alive."

He heard her sigh deeply, and bit his lip. He hesitated before he moved, sliding under the stall, sitting up across from her.

"This floor's disgusting," she said.

"Yeah, well, I already got a bunch of blood and puke on my shirt, so..."

She chuckled quietly, looking down. The toe of her red canvas shoe was propped beside him, covered in doodles, the brave and quiet way she expressed herself in everything she did.

“What d’you think?” he asked.

“About?”

“This girl.”

"She sounds awesome,” Robin said, looking at him.

“She is awesome,” Steve said, looking at her sincerely. “And what about the guy?”

“I think he’s on drugs, and he’s not thinking straight.”

Steve swallowed, shifting, a little panicked. No, no, no... She needed to know he was serious... He was serious...

“Really? ‘Cause I think he’s thinking a lot more clearly than usual...”

“He’s not,” Robin repeated firmly. “Look... He doesn’t even know this girl. And if he did know her, like— Like really know her, I don’t think he’d even want to be her friend.”

Steve’s heart jumped in his chest. Did Robin really think that way about herself? Did she really think he wouldn’t like her if he got to know her better? He already liked her better than most people he’d ever met. How could knowing her better make him like her less?

“No, that’s not true. No way is that true,” he said, leaning in closer, laying his arm over his knee.

“Steve... It’s shocked me to my core, but I like you. I really like you...”

Steve couldn’t help but smile a little.

“But I’m not like your other friends. And I’m not like Nancy wheeler.”

“Robin, that’s exactly why I like you,” he said, laughing, exasperated. Robin looked pained. She closed her eyes.

“Do you remember what I said about Click’s class? About me being jealous and like, obsessed?”

“Yeah.”

“It isn’t because I had a crush on you...,” she said, looking him in the face. There was a sadness so deep shining from her hazel eyes that he felt as though he’d been physically struck.

“It’s because... She wouldn’t stop staring at you.”

Steve blinked, confused. “Mrs. Click?”

Robin laughed, a cold and sad sound. “Tammy Thompson,” she said, slowly. “I wanted her to look at me. But... She couldn’t pull her eyes away from you and your stupid hair.”

She looked at him. “And I didn’t understand because you would get bagel crumbs... All over the floor. And you asked dumb questions. And you were a douchebag. And— And you didn’t even like her and... I would go home and just scream into my pillow.”

Steve felt his mind moving slowly, trying very hard to catch up.

“But... Tammy Thompson’s a girl,” he said.

Robin gazed at him, looking heartsick, as if she were saying goodbye to him forever.

“Steve,” she whispered softly.

“Yeah?” he said, distressed. Why was she talking like this? He watched her face grow grim, her eyebrows raised.

Oh.

“Oh,” he murmured.

She leaned in, nodding, looking tired and defeated. “Oh,” she

parroted.

Steve leaned back, the revelation that Robin liked girls sending his brain into overdrive. “Holy shit...”

“Yeah... Holy shit,” she said, looking up into the ceiling. A pause lapsed between them. He watched as she looked away, her face grim. When she looked back at him, she could tell she was doing everything in her power not to cry.

“Steve? Did you OD over there?”

“No, I just uh... Just thinking.”

“Okay,” she said uncomfortably, playing with her hair.

His mind fizzed and popped. For some stupid reason, he thought about Tommy. He remembered one time telling him he was handsome. They’d been only fourteen, going to the Snow Ball for their final dance at middle school. They’d put on nice dress shirts to wear. Tommy had laughed at him and called him a homo. He thought about how much it had hurt him, and he licked his lips. He thought about calling Jonathan queer, almost lashing out at Billy in the shower... He decided, then and there, that he would never do that to someone again in his life. It was easy to fling those things around when you didn't know anybody like that... The idea of saying it to Robin now was disgusting to him and he was disgusted with himself that he'd ever casually done it too.

He shrugged. “I mean, yeah. Tammy Thompson, you know, she’s cute and all but... I mean. She’s a total dud.”

“She is not!”

“Yes, she is. She wants to be, like, a singer. She wants to move to, like, Nashville and shit.”

“She has dreams!” Robin said defensively.

“She can’t even hold a tune! She’s practically tone deaf. Have you heard her?”

Robin laughed.

“All the time!” Steve sang off key. “ *You see me now, tonight!* ”

“Shut up!”

“ *You need me more than eveeeer!”*

“She does not sound like that!”

“She sounds exactly like that, that’s a great impersonation of her.”

“She does not! You sound like a Muppet.”

“She sounds like a Muppet! She sounds like a Muppet giving birth!” Steve chortled. He imitated Kermit the Frog. “ *And if you could hoooold me tight!* ”

“ *We’ll be holding on forever!* ” Robin joined in, doing an equally bad Kermit impersonation.

“Exactly!” Steve said.

“I know!” Robin cackled, finally breaking. They giggled. Steve had tears in his eyes and could barely breathe, he was laughing so hard.

The door to the bathroom flung open and Erica and Dustin came striding in. They looked pissed.

“Okay! What the hell?”

Steve looked at them, then at Robin, and they both burst out laughing.

Billy grabbed his surfboard, laughing excitedly, his Mom cheering on the beach, his wet hair blowing in the wind.

“Billy.”

Billy lifted his head, startled. Who was that? His Mom was calling his name, and he wanted to run to her. He turned, but he couldn’t see anybody… The voice spoke again.

“Billy, you don’t have to do this. Billy… Your name’s Billy, Billy Hargrove. You live on 4819 Cherry Oak drive. Billy, please, I’m Max, I’m your—“

Something stirred in his heart. Max.

Max.

Max.

He looked over at his Mom. She was gesturing for him, grinning, waiting to hold him in her arms. He turned away from her, and looked out across the sea, his surfboard under his arm. A strange cloud loomed in the distance, crackling, heavy and dark. It scared him.

"Max,” he whispered. Something was wrong…

“Come on, Billy!”

Billy looked at his Mom, turning away from the dark clouds. She would protect him… She would help him find Max…

He ran to her.

Billy grabbed his surfboard, laughing excitedly, his Mom cheering on the beach, his wet hair blowing in the wind.

“Come on or Dad will be mad!”

A horrible pain burst in his leg. He screamed. Then another. Then another.

“Seven… Feet.”

Billy looked at his Mom, but it wasn’t his Mom: i t was The Girl. He stared at her.

A strange sound was whispering in his ears, like water through a cave underground. He was leaning above her, his hands on either side of her face, clutching the warm sand. His body was still and rigid.

“You told her... The wave was seven feet.”

The wave swelled before his eyes and he felt its spray on his face.

“You ran to her, on the beach.”

His Mom cried out in happiness, cheering him on.

“There were seagulls. She wore a hat... With a blue ribbon.”

Billy gasped.

“A long dress... With a blue and red flower. Yel— Yellow sandals, covered in sand. She was really pretty...”

Billy was very still. He closed his eyes and saw his Mom. She was laughing happily.

“And you... You were happy.”

The Girl’s hand was soft on his face. He felt like he had never felt a hand so soft, so welcoming. Beside him, the ocean had stopped swaying, as if the moon had disappeared from the sky. The water was still as glass, frozen in time. The storm had arrived, the dark and purple clouds angry above them. He closed his eyes. He heard voices, a tapestry of memories, weaving together from frayed ends, fragments of who he had been and who he was crossing and stitching themselves in his mind. He knew these voices...

Max.

Max.

She was his sister. She had red hair. She liked to skateboard.

He recalled a shadow across a set of headlights, remembered a tendril seeking him, pulling him into oblivion.. He remembered a shadow, a fever... He remembered the Thing. He stood, staring it down. He was in the atrium at the mall. It was night time... And the Darkness was looming above him, a sinewy mockery of flesh, a shadowy rot towering into the glass ceiling. He knew what it wanted. It wanted The Girl dead. Hatred flared in his heart. He wouldn’t let it. He

wouldn't.

It flung a tendril to grab the Girl, and he cried out.

"No!"

He grabbed it.

He was screaming, his voice echoing through his head. The darkness that had seeped into the corners of his mind recoiled, something in his will to survive forcing it to recede, the kernel of goodness that he knew was somewhere hidden in his heart bursting forth, urging him to resist, to revile against the thing which had settled like a parasite in his thoughts. The Girl had reached for him, and he had been unable to reach back. He closed his eyes as the pressure in his head grew. Max's eye was black, and he had been too weak to stop the creature from hurting her, had been too weak to stop himself from hurting everyone. He wouldn't let it get her. He wouldn't let it get the little girl who had been brave enough to come and find him in the darkness. He wouldn't let it take over this shitty little town he had come to call home.

The creature seemed perturbed somehow. Billy felt it's consciousness at the back of his mind like a flickering beam from a lighthouse deep in the night. It couldn't comprehend his will, his desire to fight against it. He felt its mind move like the smooth eye of a whale peeking up from the depths of the sea, looking in, and diving back down. Billy knew its intentions. He had become a useless soldier who could no longer follow its orders. It would sever him from the pack, like a dead nerve. He held on tighter. He knew he couldn't accomplish much. He yanked and pulled at the sinewy flesh of the creature, distracting it. As sure as if it was his own arm, he felt one of its tendons rear up. He knew this was the end. Billy had always felt death walking alongside him, a close companion. He had always known his time was short, always knew he was destined to walk into darkness sooner rather than later. He screamed, louder than he had ever been able to speak, twisting the mottled limbs of the monster. He heard flesh rend, and the pressure in his head reach a fever pitch. His eyes felt like they burst. He felt something trickle out of his ear. The creature roared.

He felt something alien and strange explode into his chest. He felt pain. The creature was holding onto his heart. His consciousness flickered. There was a great rush of air.

He was falling...

Steve watched from afar as Billy turned, roaring, his arms covered in deep wounds, ripping apart the disgusting flesh of the creature that had possessed him. His heart was hammering in his ears. He looked around. The kids were crying. Robin looked frozen. There was nothing Billy could do...

He was going to die.

Feeling desperate and terrified, he grabbed a nearby piece of tile and mortar that had come loose from a display of palm fronds, and threw it with all his might at the creature, yelling incoherently, trying to distract it. It barely made an impact, disappearing into the flesh of the Mind Flayer. What was taking Joyce and Hopper so long? Eleven couldn't fight anymore... Billy was dying... They would all be dead soon...

He went scrabbling for another piece of debris, mindlessly searching. He heard Max screech and looked up. The creature had extended one of its sinewy limbs and pierced Billy's chest. All of the breath went out of Steve's lungs as he watched the creature toss Billy aside, like a bratty child who had broken a favourite toy. Billy flew through the air. Not realizing he had moved, Steve was sprinting, running faster than he had ever ran in his entire life. Billy's head careened toward the concrete and tile of the Starcourt Mall floor and Steve leapt forward, trying to break his fall. Billy crashed into him at high speed and they slid along the floor, crashing into the counter of the destroyed Panda Express. Steve hit his head and saw stars, the flickering green neon strip that ran beneath the counter display multiplying and swaying dizzily. He blinked, trying to focus, and turned his head. Past Billy's blond hair he saw the Mind Flayer give a great shudder... Then it screamed, throwing itself from side to side, crashing into the concrete and steel of the mall, then fell to the floor in a thundering, disgusting squelch.

Steve blinked once, unbelieving that they had won, that they were safe... Then his heart jolted and he flew into action, extracting himself from Billy's sprawled body, looking down at him.

It was bad. It was really, really bad.

Steve had a little bit of first aid training. As captain of the basketball team, he had been coerced into getting his first aid by the coach, in case someone needed it. He knew you had to stop the bleeding. His brain felt like it was misfiring, and he hesitated. Was Billy even... Alive? He leaned down, placing his face near Billy's nose.

He wasn't breathing.

Steve looked down at the mess that was Billy's chest. Mindlessly, he flung himself into action, slamming his palms into Billy's chest, his fingers oozing blood. His mind was blank. He was vaguely aware that Max had appeared. He tried to breath air back into his lungs, tried to make him breathe again. He heard his name, maybe. He leaned down and felt his entire body jerk like he had been electrocuted.

Billy gave a tiny breath.

Someone in white pulled him away. A mass of paramedics converged on Billy like a swarm of flies. They took him away. Max ran after them. He looked around at the ruins of the Starcourt Mall. Exhausted and confused, he let a group of men in army fatigues lead him and the rest out into the parking lot. He felt like everything was very quiet and far away.

At the end of an ambulance, a paramedic was looking over his eye. Robin was holding his hand.

"You're alright," the paramedic told him. "Two weeks and you'll be alright." He went away.

He and Robin sat in silence for a long time. Then Steve spoke up, looking at Robin with an exhausted, ironic grin.

"Guess we're gonna have to find a new job, huh?"

3. "Boys Don't Cry" - The Cure (1979)

August 3rd, 1985

Billy's world was darkness and silence. He knew he breathed, he felt that maybe he lived— But every breath felt choking, his chest on fire, his entire body feeling like poison ran through his veins. Perhaps he was wrong, perhaps he was dead, and this was his particular ring of fire which he had been consigned to for hurting all of those people, for hurting people his entire life. Their faces flashed accusatory and shadowed on his brain, fuzzy and incomplete. He knew the creature, that thing, the one who had invaded his body and taken over his mind, was still alive because the world around him could not possibly be this dark, this silent, this full of agony without its clutches. He felt hands all over his body. He cried out but his voice was nothing, his scream vibrating in his throat and making no sound. Hands clutched at him like vice grips, holding him down. He wept and wailed, thrashing, trying to get away.

There was a prick of pain in his arm, and he felt his mind fade, fade into nothing... He felt his body go loose.

Faintly, he hoped very dearly that he was dying.

August 5th, 1985

"Hey," Max said quietly. She knew Billy couldn't hear her, but it felt good to talk to him anyway. A nurse had propped him up with pillows, and he was sitting vaguely upright. His nostrils flared, his eyes bandaged over. She saw the red stains on the side of his face from where the blood had leaked out of his ears all over the polished marble of the Starcourt Mall and she swallowed hard. Hadn't anyone washed his face? Hadn't anyone bothered to clean him a little? Maybe they hadn't. Maybe they thought there would be no point. She bit her lip. At times she had hated her step brother. Other times she had wanted him to die and take her step dad with him. Other times he made her so sad she wanted to cry.

She didn't know how to feel about him now.

What he had done was nothing short of heroic. She looked at the beeping machines attached to his chest, his arms. Outside the summer sun was shining cheerily down on the big hospital in Indianapolis, coming in through the curtains. The whole place smelled of antiseptic, the scent clinging in her nose. She hadn't spent a lot of time in hospitals. Despite the cheery sun and the gentle greens of the walls, she felt uncomfortable, creeped out, the stories El had told about the Hawkins lab coming back to her in a wave.

Max realized he didn't know she was there in the room with him. He had no way of knowing. He was deaf, and blind, and the doctors had told them it would take a long time for them to heal. She tried to think of how she could let him know it was her, without startling him. Biting her lip, she made her way across the room and over to the bed. She climbed up on top of the sheets, nestling herself between his outstretched feet. He leaned away from her, making a small strangled noise in his throat, as though wanting to speak, but feeling unsure. Max reached out for his hand and brought it forward, running his bruised fingers through her long red hair. She watched his Adam's Apple dip as he swallowed hard. She pulled his hand from her hair and took it in her own. With her other hand she wrote out her name on his palm.

"M," she muttered. "A... X."

Billy opened his mouth. "MAH... MAHCKS?" he asked loudly, the syllables soft. She smiled, feeling very teary eyed for reasons she couldn't explain.

"Yeah," she said out loud, grabbing his hand and squeezing. "It's me."

She sniffed and took his palm.

Y... E...S.

Billy opened and closed his mouth several times, swallowing. He

grabbed her hand, flipping her palm upward, his eyebrows dipping and his lips grimacing in pain with the movements.

She watched as he took his index finger and drew.

S... A... F.... E... ?

She let out a small, garbled sob and grabbed his hand.

Y... E...S.

She heard a strangled cry escape him and she had never before heard him make such a sound. She sniffled, tears streaming down her cheeks. She took his hand again.

U... R... B...R....A... V... E

He shook his head slowly, small choked sobs escaping wetly from his throat.

He flipped over her hand, writing on her small palm, his hand trembling like a leaf.

S...C...A...R...E...D.

It seemed impossible to her for Billy Hargrove to ever be scared of anything. She had never seen him fearful, had never seen him cry. He wasn't like her friends, who were nerdy and tender things. He was cocky, mean and domineering. This fear shocked her to her core. He had treated her with disdain, bullied her, her friends... But one thing she had always been assured of was that her older brother was fearless, for better or worse. The admission that he had been afraid felt like some foundation that she had built herself on went crumbling away beneath her. It was childish to think he was invincible, she realized— and when she thought about his sobs, his begging pleas when they had done the sauna test, she realized he had been scared for a long time.

Her step-dad treated him differently, treated him badly. Both Neil and Billy tried to hide it from her, but she'd seen it, one day. She

thought of a day she'd caught Billy standing over Neil as he slept on the couch, looking at him with an expression that had disturbed her. She had eventually dismissed it as him just being dramatic, but then… The way he'd gone crazy, hurt Steve… As his bloody knuckled hand trembled in her small one, she realized he was just young, like her. He was scared and sad and lost.

Billy had been overtaken by the evil that lurked on the other side, the terrifying shadow of their world... The Upside Down had swallowed him whole, and it had broken him. She thought of Will, his quiet furrowed brows, the way the back of his neck rose in goosebumps, the way he blinked and smiled and it didn't reach his eyes. Sitting with Billy on a clean hospital bed, the outside world too cheery to be comfortable, she realized that he needed her, someone who understood the seeping evil that had taken hold of him.

She took both of his hands in hers, one of his fingers hooked up to a clunky heart monitor, and held them tightly.

"SAFE," she whispered, spelling the word over and over again on his palm.

SAFE... SAFE... SAFE...

August 31st, 1985

Billy's hearing returned slowly, and then all at once, like a bubble had popped and suddenly he could hear his father and step-mother talking intensely in the kitchen from his place on the living room couch.

"—never comes back?" his Dad demanded. Billy could picture his cold and flinty eyes as he backed Susan into a corner.

"Then— Then we will deal with it!" he heard Susan cry out, and he internally commended her for her bravery. She was much more meek than her daughter, but she still had a little bit of fight left in her

where his Dad's past girlfriend's had slowly succumbed to the constant threat of violence.

Billy hummed quietly to himself, testing his voice and his hearing. A perverse part of him wanted to pretend his hearing was gone just a little longer, just to see what whispered words were said about him when they thought he couldn't listen. He had always been afraid to know, but now that he was stuck in the void of darkness behind his eyes, he felt like he had to know. He felt like the knowledge he could hear was like a secret weapon, something special he could keep close. He clung to this ideal like a drowning man, licking his lips. He was sure they'd find out eventually, but for now... He would listen. He would be quiet.

And he would survive.

"What if Billy... What if he's like a... A retard for the rest of his life? What'll we do?" his father continued, and Billy was distantly pleased to hear the note of distress warbling in his voice. He knew it wasn't for him – his dad was just worried about his son being different from the brawny, manly sons of his buddies — but it felt good all the same.

"Neil," Susan hissed. "Calm down!"

Billy felt it coming before it happened.

A tart and hollow sound echoed across the house and he knew Susan had been slapped across the face.

"Don't tell me what to do!" he heard his Dad growl, almost hysteric. He heard a bit of shuffling, a small sob that might have come from Susan, and then his father's heavy boots walked across the house toward him. Billy felt his body tense automatically, anticipating what his Dad might do.

He felt a firm hand dig into his arm, as if attempting to be reassuring. Billy tensed and spun his head toward the hand, pretending he couldn't hear his Dad's heavy breathing near his face.

“You’re gonna get better, son,” he heard his Dad mutter, pity and anger mixing strangely in his voice. Billy heard the implication loud and clear.

You better get better.

Billy jumped a little when his Dad’s hand left him. He unconsciously rubbed his arm where
Neil’s hand had been, leaning back with a wince of pain into the couch cushions. His gut was paining him, and the noise of the television was almost unbearably loud and shrill. He ached to turn it off, but that would betray that he could hear it. He heard his Dad leave out of the back door and the engine of his pickup as it roared to life. Susan sniffled softly nearby.

Was Max home? He couldn’t tell.

His routine for the last week had consisted of Susan coming into his room in the morning to change his bandages, then sitting him on the couch in the living room and waiting in endless agony until Max got home. For a full week he’d been confined by the pricking pain in his guts to the horror of his own memories. Only touch was his saving grace, and when Max came home, she would lead him back to his bedroom, change his bandages again, and then sit him on the bed, taking his hand and writing words on his palm.

Last night she had written:

“EL + BYERS MOVED.”

That hadn’t surprised him. Clearly that family had some kind of curse on them, and this town was no good for them. The flare of fear he felt knowing that the girl, El, wasn’t around anymore surprised him, but… She was the one who’d saved him, after all. Without her… He swallowed. He clenched his fists.

Max came in a few hours later, the noise of her shoes being kicked off at the door alerting him. Neil wasn’t home yet. She immediately came over to him and took his palm, writing her name. He nodded. She took his hand and led him to his room as was their usual ritual,

the muscles and flesh of his gut pulling and stinging painfully. He sat down on his bed with a grunt, his jaw clenching. The new flesh was itchy, and was easy to tear. Max went to work changing his bandages, and he had the thought that she was very, very brave for doing it. Not many kids her age would do this kind of thing. It must've looked really nasty.

"Max," he said quietly, as she changed the bandages. "I can hear again."

She jumped, accidentally pulling a little on the bandage she was winding around his torso. He grunted in pain.

"You can?" she asked, pausing, keeping her voice low.

"Yeah," he whispered.

"When?" she asked him.

"Earlier today," he replied, clenching his jaw. "Neil and Susan don't know... I want to keep it that way... For a little while."

"W—why?" she asked, confused.

"I don't want to talk to them," he said simply, feeling far away. It felt nice to hear Max again, at the very least.

"Okay," she said, uncomfortably. "For how long?"

"I dunno," he said.

She finished changing the bandages. He listened as she put the first aid supplies back on the shelf and felt her slight weight on the bed as she sat beside him.

They sat in silence, side by side, for a long, long time.

September 7th, 1985

“Ugh, a kid puked in the corner by the kid’s section…,” Robin groaned, curling her lip as she walked past holding a plastic money till in her hands.

“Dibs not it!” Steve shouted from across the room where he was sweeping the entryway to the Family Video, putting his finger on his nose for good measure.

“Too bad— I cleaned up the last pile of vomit, so it’s your turn now,” Robin said brightly, plunking the till onto the counter and throwing him a cloth.

Steve made a face. She was right. He caught the rag unenthusiastically and the bottle of spray cleaner that followed immediately after. He gave her a grimace and went in.

The store was closed. Robin walked around the counter and started tallying the cash as he wove his way through the rows of tapes until he got to the kid’s section. Sure enough, a small spatter of what could only be vomit was decorating the blue and yellow peel-n-stick floor tile next to a copy of MADMAX: The Road Warrior that had been incorrectly left there. He grimaced a at the film, spraying the floor and worked at scraping off the vomit.

“Why do kids even vomit in here? How does that even happen?” he exclaimed incredulously at Robin. She held up an angry finger, her mouth muttering the numbers she was trying to count. After she was done she looked up and shrugged.

“I dunno. Maybe it’s the mountains of candy they keep as prizes across the street at the arcade that might have something to do with it. You saw that group of kids, they were fucking wired.”

Steve shrugged, wiping a fleck of vomit he’d missed. He straightened up, grabbing the misplaced copy of MADMAX: The Road Warrior and putting it back where it belonged. His hand brushed the name Max and he sighed. He had seen Max a couple of days ago with the troupe of Nerds. They’d all looked extremely down and out of sorts. He

couldn't blame them. El and Will had moved away, Hopper was gone... They'd almost had to bury Billy. For a long time, nobody was sure if he would even make it. Max had told him that he'd woken up two weeks ago, despite the doctor's warnings that he never might. Steve couldn't help but smirk a little. Billy Hargrove was a lot of things, most of them irritating, difficult, and downright mean, but he wasn't surprised that he'd been too stubborn to keel over and die like everyone expected him to.

"Hey, Rob, Billy woke up a couple weeks ago," he told her, coming to stand by the counter where she was sorting bills into piles.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Max was in. Guess he was too stubborn to die," he said grimly.

"I do not envy him," Robin said, picking the till up in her arms and walking purposefully into the back room. Steve followed her.

"Yeah..."

He leaned against a shelving rack covered in VCRs and rewind machines while she busied herself with the safe.

"Well. Max said they took him home this week. He's still healing... I guess he's pretty tender in the chest," he sighed. "Apparently he's also blind right now. When he woke up he was deaf too, but she said his hearing came back a day or so ago."

Robin looked up, grimacing. "Oof..."

"Yeah..."

"Is that permanent?" Robin asked, straightening up.

"They don't know. They don't think so, but the doctors think it'll take a really long time to heal."

Robin crossed her arms and leaned against the shelving, mirroring

Steve.

They were silent for a long time, the heaviness of what they had gone through thick between them.

“I can’t imagine how... Lonely he must be,” Robin shivered, her voice small. “I don’t know him at all, but from what you told me... Jesus. I mean, the guy comes here, against his will, and then in under a year the Upside Down gets him, makes him do all those awful things... I just... I dunno.”

Steve looked at his sneakers and twisted his lips. In silence, they got their coats on and walked to Steve’s car, getting in. He started the engine. He looked over to Robin and sighed.

“You didn’t know him at all, when he first came here. Different circles...,” Steve began, licking his lip. “I’m not gonna lie to you, he’s a dickhead, like, a real piece of work... He went totally ballistic and broke my nose last year, when the Mind Flayer tried to get Will... I think he’s a little unhinged, too... I don’t know. He got so mad... It was honestly a little scary...”

“I know,” Robin said ruefully. “I saw him from afar at school and it was like he had this aura of... I don’t even know, something really nasty that just floated around him... And nobody seemed to notice! All those guys treating him like a fucking king, all those girls just swooning over him... It was barf-worthy.”

“You jealous?” Steve teased, elbowing her, driving toward her house.

“Yes,” she sniffed. “Jealous, and confused as to why girls go for that.”

Steve shrugged. “Hey, I dated Nancy Wheeler and that was a social faux pas because she had a brain. Us popular kids, we like a little wind through our heads...,” he grinned. “Makes doing keg stands a little easier.”

“Well, Billy’s not gonna be doing keg stands for a long time, now...” Robin sighed.

“What, d’you feel bad for him or something?” Steve asked.

“Don’t you?”

Steve was perplexed. It almost sounded like she was urging him to reach out to him, but… Robin had never met Billy. He was certain that if she had, she’d stay far away. Trying to be nice to a Billy Hargrove burdened with guilt and pain would be like shouting in a sleeping bear’s ear and hoping it wouldn’t rip your face off.

“I mean, yeah. I do feel bad,” Steve shrugged. “He was obviously hurting in more ways than one, but… Him and I are not friends. Like, I’m grateful to the guy for fighting off the Mind Flayer and doing all that, but… We really don’t get along.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I guess I’m just feeling bad for myself, too… The world was a lot easier when the only demons I had to fight were my own, you know?”

Steve clenched his jaw. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “Yeah, I know.”

“I’ll tell you,” Robin said, snorting derisively, “It is extremely hard to give a shit about band practice and AP French when you know that monsters are real.”

Steve let out a breath of grim laughter.

“Yeah… It all seems just a little bit pointless, doesn’t it?”

“Pretty much,” Robin shrugged, giving him a small, ironic smile. “I mean, it was all pointless to begin with, but now it seems… So stupid. Just… Absolutely ridiculous.”

“Yeah,” Steve snorted. “Hey, at least you, Nancy, and Jonathan are smart enough to go to college and maybe make something outta all this, but me? I mean, come on… My only skills are nice hair, dad’s car, and getting my face beat in…”

“Aww,” Robin, smiled sympathetically. “That’s not true. You’re also

sort of good at scooping ice cream and really good at surviving secret Russian lairs..."

"Great, thanks Robin," Steve snorted sourly. "That makes me feel so much better..."

"Hey, stop that," Robin said, smacking him on the arm. "Maybe it's true. Maybe you don't have a lot of skills... Fine. But you're a brave person, a nice person, and you're a hard worker. And— even more importantly— you learned to be like that. I think that's important, don't you?"

Steve felt a flare of affection for Robin. How had he lived his life without her cutting wit and incredible insights? He supposed he hadn't, not really. She had quickly become his best friend, the person he trusted most in the world. He hadn't realized until recently that he had never had a best friend until Robin. Not a real one, anyways.

"Thanks," he said sincerely. "The stuff I learned... Unlike all this other garbage... It doesn't feel pointless. You know?"

"Yeah," she smiled warmly. "Yeah, I get it."

September 8th, 1985

"Hey, Dad, do you mind if I borrow the car tomorrow?" Steve asked casually, stabbing a pea with his fork and popping it into his mouth. Across from him on the other side of the dinner table his mother's blonde head flicked up, her chewing slowing down to a snail's pace, her hands curling away from her knife and fork. At the head of the table, his father stopped eating and stared at him.

"Which one?" his Dad asked through a bite of food.

"The 83' is fine. Doesn't matter."

"You got a date or something, sport?" his Dad asked, taking a drink

of his glass of red wine.

“Oh, no, nothin’ like that. I just got the day off for once, and I wanna go out to a movie or something.”

“Hm,” his Dad said, nodding. “The 83’ needs a tune up. If you do the tune up, you can have it. Full tank of gas when it comes home, Steve. That’s non-negotiable.”

Steve stopped himself from rolling his eyes. Non-negotiable… Sport. His dad was always trying to make a deal, even with his loved ones.

“Thanks Dad,” he said. Regardless, he was thankful. He watched as his mom pushed her chicken around her plate, her shiny silver bracelets jingling against the porcelain.

“You haven’t had a date in so long, Steve, not since Nancy,” she said, bringing a tiny piece of chicken to her mouth, chewing it daintily. His mother was 130 pounds of fake tan, perfect French tips, shiny blue tracksuit, and big blonde hair. She didn’t work— why would she?— and spent her summers lounging at the pool with other moms and her winters organizing a dizzying array of town functions. She was very nice, but a bit of a ditz... Just like him.

“Yeah, you know... Just haven’t been seeing any girls I like,” he shrugged, taking a sip of water.

“Oh, come on now!” his Dad teased jovially, leaning over to clap him on the back. “That can’t be true! You’re good old King Steve, eh?”

Steve put his glass down, his lips twisting.

“Well... Turns out it’s hard to get dates scooping ice cream and renting out movies,” Steve said grimly, stabbing his chicken moodily.

“Hm,” his Dad said, pursing his lips. “And whose fault is that?”

Steve leaned back in his chair, holding back a retort. He knew his situation was his fault in a lot of ways, but he also hadn’t exactly

planned on Demogorgans and Mind Flayers to appear in the Hallmark Channel original movie rendition of his life that he thought he'd been living. The worst part was, he couldn't tell his parents. He couldn't explain why he had a hard time sleeping, why he didn't want to leave Hawkins to go to college, or go on dates. They would never believe him, first off— and he wasn't totally unconvinced that his house and every other household that had been involved in the Upside Down incidents were wiretapped. Every time he answered the phone he tried to remember that there was someone listening.

"It's my fault, Dad," Steve exclaimed, exasperated. "I know."

"That's right," his Dad said, eating loudly, glaring at Steve, his brows bristling.

"Oh, come on, Donnie," his Mom sighed, giving his Dad a plaintive look. "Let's not fight at the dinner table..."

"Sandra, you can't just keep making excuses for him!" his Dad said, raising his voice and slapping the table. "He's got to learn that this world doesn't give out things for free! He's gotta work for them, like I did!"

Steve stopped just short of rolling his eyes into the ceiling. That was rich coming from his Dad, whose father before him had been a successful factory owner before and during the war. The money from the sale of those factories had funded almost everything Donnie Harrington had ever done.

"Yeah, and I'm working aren't I, Dad? I'm making money, working all the time, so— What's your problem?"

His mother put her head in her hands, pulling the bottle of wine toward her.

"My problem, Steven, is that you fucked around for your entire high school career and now there isn't a goddamn college out there that will have you! Did you even once think about your future?"

"Yeah, Dad, I did think about it!" Steve yelled, his face becoming

mottled and red. “But guess what? It didn’t work out, alright? Not that you’d know anything about it! Grandpa was a pretty generous benefactor to Indiana State, wasn’t he?”

His father’s face went tomato red.

“Oh, yeah, that must have been real hard to get into school there,” Steve continued, knowing he was crossing lines with impunity, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. His Dad had been on his ass the entire summer and he was sick of it.

“You can forget about the 83’, young man!” his father bellowed. “You aren’t getting shit!”

Steve stood up from the table.

“I wasn’t getting shit anyways,” he snarled, throwing himself away from the table and stomping upstairs.

He went into his bedroom and slammed the door. He could hear the muffled echo of his parents arguing beneath him through the carpet and threw himself on his bed, shoving a pair of headphones on and pushing play on his Walkman, grinding his teeth and crossing his arms. The Pretenders Talk of the Town played in his ear as he fumed. His Dad didn’t know shit, and his Mom was too much of a fucking airhead to care.

For some reason, he thought about Billy Hargrove. The conversation he and Robin had shared the day before came back to him. He realized he didn’t really know much about Billy at all, other than the fact that he was an asshole, drove a 79’ Camaro, and that he was Max’s half-brother. He thought about the parking lot last December, and wondered not for the first time why he had even bothered to apologize. It wasn’t like Steve had been socially relevant at all in the weeks following the attack of the Mind Flayer on Will. His friends had pretty much ditched him for Billy, following him around like lost dogs, begging for the scraps of his infamy. Strangely, however, he could never bring himself to hate him. He knew that he probably deserved it... But Billy’s apology had been so genuine, so out of the ordinary from anything he had done since he got to Hawkins, that he

had believed him, and so had forgiven him a long time ago. Maybe he was a complete dumb ass for forgiving a guy like that, but… He had been rewarded more greatly for stupider decisions in the past.

Steve realized that, other than his little sister, he had nobody.

A very stupid plan formed slowly in his mind.

September 14th, 1985

Steve walked up the steps of 4819, Cherry Oak drive, paused in front of the door, raised his fist to knock... And then turned around and walked back down the steps.

What the fuck am I doing? he thought hysterically to himself. Billy didn't want visitors, and he definitely didn't want him of all people to come and visit. They barely knew each other, and the only things they had ever exchanged were a few nasty insults and even nastier punches. Steve should just leave the vulgar douchebag to his misery.

He got to the end of the walkway and stopped. He sighed heavily.

Then again... Steve drummed his fingers on his thigh, looking down at his sneakers. He saw a spatter of red on the blue suede toe of his right shoe, a stain from when his face was being smashed in by Russians. He let out a breath and steeled himself, walking quickly back up the pathway toward the house. He knocked smartly.

A red-headed, diminutive middle-aged woman opened the door and looked at him, her brows furrowing. Steve flicked his wayfarers up onto his head and smiled at her.

"Hey, I was just wondering if Billy was home?" he asked, leaning one of his arms against the doorframe in what he hoped was an easy and casual manner.

The woman smiled but it didn't reach her eyes.

“Yes, he’s here, but...”

“Oh— oh I know that he’s, uh... About the brain thing,” Steve informed her quickly, flicking his hand and putting his other hand on his hip.

“Oh, I see,” the woman said, nodding. She looked a little hesitant. “Please come in.”

Steve walked in.

It was a modest house, clean. A closet beside the door vomited a disorganized pile of shoes into the entryway. Just past the closet through a square archway was a sitting room, where Steve could hear the sound of cheering and a sports announcer coming loudly from the TV.

“A friend came to see Billy,” the woman announced, wringing her hands and walking into the hallway, pausing in the archway. Steve looked into the living room and saw a recliner chair and the back of a balding head.

“Come to see Billy?” the man in the chair asked, not looking away from the baseball game on the TV set. “Why?”

Steve blinked.

“You know, check up on him, take him for a drive... Sir,” he added on hastily.

The man turned in his chair a little as Steve spoke up. He flicked his eyes up and down. Steve had the uncomfortable sensation he was being sized up. The man’s eyes landed on Steve’s hair and he snorted.

“Go get that boy a haircut, would you? Something respectable. Yours isn’t too bad.”

He turned back around to the TV and didn’t wait for an answer. The

woman smiled at him, still walking like she was sneaking around in her own house, and led him down the hall. She pointed to a closed door, painted white, the shrill sound of electric guitars and the rhythm of heavy drums booming from behind it. Steve swallowed. Here it was; the lair of the beast, as it were. Metallica commanded him to Jump In The Fire. He nodded to the woman, who left him alone. He knocked, loudly as he could.

“What?” Billy’s voice hollered over the whirring guitar riffs.

“It’s Steve!” he shouted back. “Steve Harrington!”

He heard a small shuffle, a couple of clicks, and a loud crash. He heard Billy swear loudly as the music cut out. A few seconds later, the door swung open.

Now that he was face to face with him, Steve was at a loss for words. He hadn’t actually planned what he was going to say to him once he got there. He stared dumbly, looking unabashedly into his eyes, which were fixed in the middle distance. His hair seemed to lack a little of the volume it once had, and he was wearing a simple white t-shirt under a wrinkled red button-up and a pair of blue jeans. His skin looked pale and he had dark bags under his eyes. His back was stooped a little, the wound in his gut clearly paining him. He seemed thin and pinched. All in all, he looked horrible.

“Harrington?” Billy asked, annoyed.

“Yep!” Steve announced, feeling jittery.

“What the fuck do you want?” Billy repeated, slowly, his voice low.

“I just came here to see how you were doing,” Steve said.

Billy looked perturbed, his lip curling.

“Well, you seen me. Now go away.”

“Hey, wait— I was wondering if you’d like to go for a drive or something?” Steve asked in a rush, putting his arm in the doorframe

so Billy couldn't slam it on him. "Just... You know... To get outta the house..."

Billy's face became expressionless, and Steve didn't miss the way his head turned almost imperceptibly toward the living room where the man was sitting in his recliner.

"Fine," Billy said after a moment. His tone had flattened somewhat, as if all the fight had gone out of him. "Just a sec."

He started to close the door and Steve jumped away, moving his arm just in time. He was left alone in the hallway, the sounds of the woman doing dishes in the kitchen competing with the announcer on the TV giving the baseball scores. Otherwise, the house was almost unbearably quiet. A cloud went over the sun, and the light streaming through the window in the hall took on a grey cast. Suddenly another door in the hallway opened, and Max walked out. She took one look at Steve and stopped dead, her eyes popping out of her head.

She came near him, peering surreptitiously down the hall toward the living room.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed.

"What?" Steve hissed back.

"What are you doing here?" she repeated, stepping forward and smacking him on the arm.

"I'm—"

"I can hear you two whispering down there," the man in the living room called. His tone was teasing, but Steve could hear the threat of anger that loomed just beneath.

"I'm sorry, sir," Steve called out.

Max gave him a dirty look at his use of 'sir' and shook her head.

"Max, leave that guy alone," the man commanded, and Max stared at

Steve and rolled her eyes.

“Kay,” she said.

“And cut out that attitude.”

Max looked like she was going to run into the living room and strangle the man in the armchair, but she managed to hold in her fury. Billy’s door opened and he stood in the doorway, wearing a denim coat and a pair of boots. He stared out across the hall.

Max swivelled her head from her step brother to Steve, and gave him a flabbergasted look.

“You’re crazy,” she mouthed to Steve, shouldering past him into the kitchen.

Steve watched her go and was inclined to agree with her. Instead, he turned to Billy.

“You ready?”

He nodded.

Billy stepped forward and Steve scampered to get out of his way, trailing behind him as he made his slow way down the hall, his hands trailing along the walls, his shoulders bent to limit the tightness on his gut. As they passed by the living room, Steve could feel a stony gaze in their direction. He looked over and got a better look at the man’s face. He was obviously Billy’s Dad— they looked very similar — but it seemed as though this man’s good looks had gone to seed. He was balding, and wore his hair in a close crop to hide it. His salt and pepper moustache twitched beneath a straight aquiline nose, and a pair of glaring blue eyes glowered at him beneath bristling eyebrows from across the room. His eyes were disturbingly similar to Billy’s, startlingly bright and intense. He was watching Billy move with a strange expression on his face, disgust, shame, and pity warring turbulently in the twinging of his jaw. Steve thought it was odd he didn’t jump up to help him. Then again... Maybe it wasn’t so odd.

The man's eyes were on him now, and Steve nodded to him for good measure, whipping up one of his patented charming smiles. The man looked away and ignored him.

As Steve shut the front door behind them, he could have sworn the man uttered the word "faggot" under his breath. It shocked him so much he stood blinking in disbelief for several moments with his hand still on the doorknob.

"Are we goin' or not?" Billy asked.

"Oh. Yeah. Yeah! Let's get ya in the ol' Beemer," Steve said brightly, his voice a few octaves higher than usual, completely bewildered. He wanted to be gone from Cherry Oak drive as quickly as possible. He gently took Billy's forearm to lead him down the walk, but he wouldn't budge.

"No," Billy mumbled. "We're taking my car."

Steve stopped dead on the cracked concrete walkway, the keys to his fathers BMW dangling in his hand, his other still grasping Billy by the forearm.

"B.. But you can't see," Steve sputtered, confused. "You... You can't drive, dude..."

"I know that, dumbass," Billy said in that strange way he spoke, equal parts threatening and soft. "You're gonna drive."

"Oh," Steve said dumbly. "Oh. Well. Yeah. I mean, yeah. I can drive your car—"

"It's over by the shed," Billy interrupted, a little louder, pointing. Steve followed his finger. Billy was pointing quite a few feet off from where the shed actually was, half hidden behind the house, but Steve wasn't about to correct him. His eyes alighted on the roaring navy blue beast whose dust and taillights he had seen ripping around Hawkins all last year. It looked a little worse for wear, one of the windows cracked, it's door dented, and it's bumper crumpled in the

corner. He winced, remembering that he'd been the one to smash it.

"The um... The Camero?" Steve asked.

"Yeah," Billy said very slowly, mockingly. "That one."

Steve cleared his throat and made a face. He hated that Billy was intimidating even when he was recovering from a gut wound the size of Texas and was mentally reeling from an Exorcist-level demonic possession. You'd think those kinds of experiences would mellow a guy out, but it seemed that Billy was the same old crude asshole.

"Alright then," he muttered, tugging Billy by the arm, making his way toward the broken pavement that led down to the shed. It was covered with peeling white paint, and the Camaro looked sad and desolate beside it. He turned his head, making sure he'd parked the BMW out of the way enough. Satisfied, he hurried to the Camaro. Billy followed dutifully beside him, his free hand loose at his side, his head staring forward. They made it to the Camero without incident, and Steve stopped, looking sidelong at Billy, who fished in the front right pocket of his tight blue Levi's and pulled out a car key that dangled from a worn plastic Snoopy keychain.

Steve smiled, chuckling a little.

"Hah, Snoopy!" he said lightly. Billy didn't even bother looking in his direction, his face stony and expressionless.

Steve's smile fell and he cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Right."

He gently took the keys from Billy's hand, leading him toward the Camaro, planting him in front of the passenger side door. He let go of his wrist and watched as Billy reached out tentatively, unsure, his eyes looking down even though he couldn't see what was before him. He pawed around for the handle and, finding it, clicked it open and got inside, ducking his head a little more than was necessary to stop himself from clunking his head. He made a small grunt of pain as he sat down, his hand flying to his gut, grimacing. He slammed the door

shut.

Steve sighed heavily.

“What are you doing, Harrington...,” he grumbled to himself, anxious and amazed at his own actions. His plan had seemed foolproof enough in his head, as much of a plan as it had been to begin with. In reality, he just kinda felt bad for him, and he’d acted on pure whim from there. He stalked to the driver’s side door, getting in. He looked at the dashboard, the speedometers, the steering wheel. The dashboard and consoles were black with silver trim detailing, and the bucket seats they sat in were covered in worn dark leather. The whole interior looked mean and well used in a way that the taupe leather of his Dad’s cars weren’t. Beside him, Billy had fished out a pack of smokes from the breast pocket of his loose button up and was pulling one out.

He popped one in his mouth and Steve’s heart jolted. He had it in his mouth backwards. Billy searched his pocket for a lighter.

“Uh, Billy,” Steve said, his voice stilted and awkward, “Um, your cigarette—“

“What?” Billy demanded, around the end of his smoke, his lighter in his hand.

“It’s um... Just... Here.”

He reached forward and plucked the cigarette out of Billy’s lips, who froze, his hand on its way to light it.

“It was backwards, dude,” Steve said, turning it around and putting it near Billy’s lips. Billy moved his head slowly forward, finding the filter of the cigarette, and grabbed onto it with his lip. Steve retracted his hand quickly, like he was a bird flitting dangerously close to the open maw of a crocodile. He looked forward and silently blew out a stressed breath, sending one of his Farrah-approved locks of hair fluttering over his forehead. He put the key in the ignition and turned, Snoopy swinging wildly as the engine roared to life. The Camaro growled and purred as she idled and Steve couldn’t help but

smile.

“Oh yeah,” he grinned. “Oh hell yeah.”

Beside him, Billy leaned his head back against the passenger seat and closed his eyes, his elbow up on the side of the window, his other arm laid out in his lap, the cherry of the cigarette glowing above his lips.

Steve put his hand on the gearshift and did a double take.

“Oh shit,” he muttered.

Billy’s head snapped up, his eyebrows furrowing angrily.

“What, Harrington?”

Steve let out a silly laugh, pulling his hand back and rubbing his face nervously.

“I, uh...I can’t drive stick.”

A long silence followed this statement. Billy stared blankly in his general direction, his expression one of mild contempt. Steve swallowed.

“What do you mean you can’t drive stick?” Billy asked, and Steve was slightly heartened to hear that he didn’t sound a hundred percent judgemental, just mostly confused.

“Well, ever since I’ve been driving, we’ve had automatics,” Steve explained, trying to sound confident and nonchalant. “So there wasn’t any point of me learning.”

“Serious?” Billy asked, his voice a little muffled around his smouldering cigarette.

“Yeah,” Steve shrugged. He hoped it would be better to tell the truth despite Billy’s inevitable condescension than to start driving his car and grind the gears into oblivion. He figured that even severely

wounded and currently having some issues with his sight, he could probably absolutely destroy him in a fist fight...

Again.

Billy was silent for a moment.

“Harrington, how fuckin’ rich are you?” he asked, his voice midway between curiosity and a sneer.

Steve clenched his jaw.

“My Dad owns a BMW dealership,” Steve admitted.

“A dealership, huh?” Billy asked, his voice falling into that strange venomous whisper.

“Yeah,” Steve grunted uncomfortably. “But uh... I can’t drive stick, so... You wanna get in my car?”

He chucked a thumb over his shoulder, his old habits dying hard even though this gesture was useless to Billy.

“No,” Billy said softly, pulling his cigarette from his lips and tapping it over the black carpet floor of the Camaro, littering a sprinkle of ashes. He exhaled long into the air, the cab of the car swirling in thick smoke.

“Okay,” Steve said, unsure of what else to say or do. He felt like his nerves were made of lightning and every deliberate, slow move Billy made caused him to jump a little.

Billy took a few determined drags from his cigarette before snuffing it out in the ashtray below the radio. He blew out a long cloud of smoke and then reached an unsure hand for the gear shift, locating it with a few movements.

“I’m gonna teach you, Harrington,” he informed Steve calmly. He turned his head to where Steve sat, his eyes unfocused.

A smirk suddenly broke out across Billy's face as he tapped the stick.

"It's not that hard, pretty boy. I promise." Billy adjusted his belt very pointedly.

"As long as you promise," Steve heard himself say, and then immediately clamped his mouth shut and stuffed down the desire to leap out of the Camaro and throw himself into the nearest ravine. He had seen Billy do this to girls at parties, whispering real close and then getting them to say embarrassing and explicit shit without realizing until it was too late... And now he had fallen for it, hook, line, and sinker, before he could even stop himself. He squeezed his eyes shut and pursed his lips, shaking his head. When did he become such a gullible fucking twat? Where was Keg Stand King Harrington when he needed him? He heard Billy's quiet, derisive chuckle, laughing as though he could hear the mental scolding he was giving himself.

"Shut up, Hargrove," he bit, some of his fire coming back to him through the haze of awkwardness that had marked this doomed venture from its beginning.

"Ouu, sassy," Billy crooned, a smirk still firmly planted on his lips. He removed his hand from the gearshift, waving it. "After you," he said, in a mockery of graciousness.

"Alright. I know I gotta shift it into neutral and push down on the clutch..."

Billy said nothing.

Steve let out a small exasperated sigh, and put his foot down on the clutch, shifting into neutral. The Camaro started forward, rolling down the slight incline of the uneven driveway.

"Uh... Okay," Steve muttered, swallowing. Beside him, Billy closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat, holding on to the Holy Shit Handle with his right hand and grinning in a very wolffish and unsavoury way.

“Then... I switch it to first?” Steve asked, his voice squeakier than he would have liked. He tried moving the stick, but it wouldn’t budge. He panicked for a moment before slamming his foot down on the clutch and trying again. It moved and shifted. They were still slowly rolling. He put his foot down on the accelerator, lifting his other foot quickly from the clutch.

A small, sad sounding screech rang out across Cherry Oak drive as he swung the steering wheel around and right, turning onto the road.

“Eeeeeee,” Billy mocked, that same strange smile still on his face.

“Slower, okay, slower...,” Steve muttered to himself. When Billy said he’d teach him how to drive stick, he’d obviously meant he’d let Steve grind the gears of his car and mock him while he did it. He geared up, this time trying to keep his foot gently compressing on the pedals, trying to feel the gears change. The Camaro was a beastly creature and Billy had obviously tinkered under the hood a bit; it roared to life down the road and was already revving too much for the speed they were going.

“Okay, more...,” Steve said out loud, and for some reason he was sweating. He knew it was extremely stupid, but he wanted to be able to prove to this denim-wearing brute that he could do this. He had never felt self conscious in his Members Only jacket and Nike’s until Billy’s blondish mullet and fading California tan had strutted its way into Hawkins High last year, leaving a star struck crowd of country bumpkins in his wake. Steve and his crew had ruled the school all those years because they’d had what everyone else wanted— all the most expensive clothes, cars, houses— but Billy had none of those things. All he had was a cocky attitude and the assumption that they’d give him what he wanted... And they had. Unquestionably.

Steve ground his teeth and ground the gears even worse, getting a small kick out of the way they screamed in protest.

“Don’t do it on purpose,” Billy scolded, and Steve let go of the clutch gently, amazed despite his frustration that he’d been caught. He supposed Billy knew this car like the back of his hand, and would know what she sounded like when she was being abused.

They made their screeching, grinding way through the backroads of Hawkins, people turning their heads at the sound of their approach and shaking their heads at their going. They finally made it into the shopping strips at the Church Street Plaza on the outskirts of town, and Steve pulled his clunking way into the parking lot of Hawkins' one and only Denny's restaurant. He put it in park, shutting the engine off. He stared down at his feet and Snoopy waved back at him from the ignition. Silence reigned in the Camaro.

Billy turned his head around, letting his hand fall from the handle onto his lap, trying to figure out where they were without having to ask. Steve could tell he absolutely hated having to depend on anyone — Even to just figure out where he was. His expression was grey and wan, his lips curled a little. He looked rebellious and uncertain. Steve realized very suddenly that, though Billy was still scary as shit, he was, at this moment, in pain and needed his help. As he came to this realization, all the negativity which had been swarming around his head as he drove began to fizzle and fade away. The guy was a dick, but he was also young, scared, and had seen horrific and inexplicable things; his conscience heavy with the acts of terror and bloodshed that his hands had inadvertently caused.

"Where we at?" Billy finally asked, casually. Steve could hear his frustration burning at the edges of his voice.

"Denny's," Steve sighed.

"Denny's?" Billy parroted, derision on every facet of his face.

"Yeah, a fuckin'... We're at Denny's. Okay?" Steve growled. He'd gone here on a whim, old habits dying hard. He, Tommy, and Carole used to go here on Saturdays back when he gave a shit about their approval. They'd go in and laugh about dumb shit and plan dumb parties, and it had all been... Bullshit. Just like Nancy said.

"Are we gonna go... In?" Billy asked, interrupting Steve's bitter train of thought. He was shocked to hear Billy's voice had taken on a shade of discomfort and anxiety. Steve looked at him. He supposed Billy didn't really want people to see him. He had been somewhat of a

news sensation in Hawkins. Nancy had desperately tried to goad, threaten, and charm the pigs at the Hawkins Post into being gentle regarding Billy Hargrove, but he didn't totally escape their prying. They'd been aided by Billy's father, who apparently had been quite vocal about his son's condition. Steve thought this was odd considering his behaviour toward them not half an hour ago. What ended up being reported was that Billy had heroically managed to save the lives of ten people trapped in the collapsing Starcourt Mall, but had sustained severe brain injuries as a result, causing severe injuries. Though it was a far cry from the truth, the general population knew his name and knew something had happened to him. Billy likely didn't want to be asked any questions.

"I mean, we don't have to. I don't really care. I just kinda went here without thinking," Steve said, his voice casual, shrugging even though Billy couldn't see him. Billy was fishing out another cigarette and lighting it, his expression somewhere in the vicinity of uncaring and deeply concerned.

"No. I'm hungry," Billy said stolidly, as though refusing to admit he was intimidated to be in public.

"I can go in and get it," Steve offered, suddenly realizing what getting out of the car would mean. He'd have to lead Billy along again, only this time in plain view of everyone doing their shopping.

"I said, I'm hungry, Harrington!" Billy growled, reaching for the handle of the passenger side door and flinging it open, getting out of the car. Steve bit his lip. It didn't matter to him or anyone else that Billy needed different things now, but he knew that to Billy it would be different. His swaggering aggression told Steve that maybe he'd never considered what it would be like if someday he had to change the way he lived his life. He knew his temporary blindness or even his mobility issues weren't actually the problem… It was the asking for help that made him curl his lip and scowl into the floor.

Steve grabbed the keys and shoved them in his pocket, quickly getting out and coming around to stand by Billy, who was finishing his cigarette and swivelling his head around like an owl, taking in the sounds of the outside world. He dropped the butt of his cigarette to

the pavement and stabbed a foot out, grinding his toe into the dirt. He missed completely. Steve silently reached the toe of his Adidas sneaker out and crushed the smouldering butt, thankfully without him noticing.

“Alright. It’s the middle of the day on a Tuesday, so I think this place’ll be— They’ll have enough room for us,” Steve corrected quickly. He was going to say “empty” so Billy would know there’s nobody around to see him, but he thought that was a little too harsh, even for someone as harsh as Billy.

“Fine,” Billy grunted, sweeping his hair out of his face and holding out an arm, his expression contorted into a grimace.

Steve smiled an awkward and uncomfortable half smile and grabbed his wrist. He tugged Billy along behind him. They managed to get into the restaurant without any fuss, and Steve seated them at a booth near the back, the window beside them giving them a thrilling view of the Walgreen’s parking lot. He stood waiting beside Billy while he tapped his foot forward and found the bench, sliding along the worn vinyl and sitting in the middle.

Steve scampered into the bench across from him, folding his arms and leaning back in the seat. Billy was lighting another cigarette, reaching out a tentative hand across the table, looking for the ashtray. Steve helpfully took it and slid it over to his hand. Their fingers brushed briefly and Billy inexplicably tapped the top of his hand twice, like he were comforting a dying loved one, before sliding the ashtray toward himself and carefully tapping his cigarette into it.

“You like to smoke, huh?” Steve commented, immediately regretting opening his mouth. What was fucking wrong with him?

“No shit,” Billy muttered around his cigarette.

“My Dad used to smoke, but he quit. He and my mom are into this weird Scarsdale diet shit. They only eat foods that are the same, at the same time? I don’t even fucking know. They’re always on some bullshit health kick...”

Steve knew he was nervously ranting, and not only was he nervously ranting, he was nervously ranting about boring yuppie rich people shit like the wealthy asshole he was. He rubbed his forehead, stemming the tide of his word vomit. Billy spread his legs, leaning back, taking a long drag. It occurred to Steve that Billy might be smoking so much because he was nervous, too.

Steve eyed the pack he'd placed on the plastic tabletop.

"Camels," he commented, barely keeping the disgust out of his voice.

"You want one?" Billy asked him quietly around the end of his smoke.

"No thanks," he said. .

"You on that diet too, huh?" Billy teased, the corners of his mouth quirking ever so slightly.

"Oh no— God no..."

"Then have one."

Steve stared sourly at the pack on the table and, never one to back down from a challenge, took one. He liked to smoke, but Camels? Billy held out his zippo and he took it, flicking it, lighting it and taking a drag. He put the lighter on the table and immediately coughed and sputtered into the side of the booth.

Billy laughed, a derisive and cold sound.

Steve clenched his jaw and spent the next few minutes resolutely smoking the cigarette and desperately trying to hold in his coughs.

"Where's the...," (he held in a cough), "Where's the service in this joint, anyways?"

"Right here, Stevie," a voice called out brightly, one he recognized. Steve swore under his breath as he looked up and watched Carole come trotting towards them, wearing a half apron, a red polo shirt,

and a shiny little name tag. He cursed himself for forgetting that she had gotten a job here after high school in what she referred to as her ‘gap year,’ before her daddy inevitably goaded her into picking a university.

She came to their table holding menus, swept her eyes around, took one look at Billy, and gasped.

“Oh my god, Billy Hargrove? Is that you? I read all about what happened. Holy shit! Are you okay?”

Billy’s face was smouldering and sweet in an instant.

“Other than being unable to see your pretty face, I’m alright,” he said to her, that self-satisfied smirk working in the corner of his moustache. Steve looked at him, mystified. He was certain that even if he could see, there was no way he’d be able to guess her name without the help of her name tag. He’d not so much as given her cursory glances before.

“Oh stop!” Carole giggled. She laid down a menu in front of him and stared into his eyes. She handed a menu to Steve without looking at him.

“So, um... Is your sight like, permanent or...?”

Steve glared at her. What the hell? He knew she lacked tact, but he never knew just how bad it was until he’d spent a bit of time away from her and Tommy. Listening to them speak in their final year of high school had been like nails on a chalkboard. They just said whatever came to their heads regardless of how it sounded.

“No way, babe,” Billy smirked. “I should be back to lookin’ over old Hawkins real soon.”

Carole looked relieved, though Steve was puzzled as to why she would be relieved.

“Okay, well— If you need anything you just let me know!”

“Sure, sugar... How about we start with a black coffee.”

Carole giggled and walked away without waiting for Steve to tell her what he wanted.

It was only when they were safely seated back in the Camaro that Billy’s countenance fell back into sourness.

Steve, not knowing what else to do, started the car and backed out, making his slow, gear-grinding way down the strip. Silence passed between them for many minutes, during which Steve was debating about whether or not he should apologize for Carole, when Billy spoke up.

“Trying to use me to get points with the ladies is a low blow, Harrington,” Billy said, a cutting edge to his voice.

“Using— What?” Steve exclaimed. Out of all the things Billy could have said, he hadn’t been expecting that.

“Dragging me around so people will think you’re such a caring dude... Yeah. Pretty good strategy.”

Steve was gobsmacked, and accidentally ground the gears so badly he gave up and pulled to the shoulder of the road where the strip mall slowly transitioned into scrubby trees. He yanked the car into park.

“Dude... what are you saying? She—“

Steve laughed a little.

“Okay, first off, I know you can’t see right now, so I’ll tell you what Carole was doing. She was basically slobbering over you. I’m pretty sure I got drool in my coffee. Second, I might as well have been a piece of... Of dust, or a dead fly, for the amount of times she looked at me. Third, she’s dating Tommy and honestly— no offence— but the air blows a little too hard through Carole’s head for me to like her

that way."

Billy glared. "Screw you. You're lying."

"No, I'm not lying. I promise you I'm not lying!"

"Then why are you here, Harrington?" Billy demanded, turning to face him. Steve stared into his eyes. They looked tired, and maybe even a little sad. They used to be bright, sometimes mischievous and sometimes glassy with liquor. Now they were dull, covered in a white film, like two washed stones smoothed over by the relentlessness of the sea.

"Because I want to be."

The truth came out easy, even though Steve had been uncomfortable admitting it to himself. Robin had planted the idea in his head that Billy would have been lonely, guilt-ridden, and confused, but the truth was he'd been thinking a lot about him before their talk. Sure, he had Max, but she was still a kid in a lot of ways, and she hadn't done and seen the things that Billy had been forced to do.

Billy's face looked unbelieving, even hostile.

Steve sighed in frustration, crossing his arms on the steering wheel and resting his head on them, his face turned to where Billy was sitting.

"Look," Steve said quietly, after a few moments. "If I didn't want to hang out with you, I wouldn't have bothered to come."

Billy turned his head away from Steve and put his head against the headrest, his expression a myriad of emotions that Steve didn't even try to interpret.

"So you feel bad for me," Billy said, his voice constricted with emotion. "Is that it? You feel... Bad for the poor bastard who— Who let that thing make him do all that shit?"

His voice was rising in volume as he spoke.

“The ugly motherfucker who can’t fuckin’ see anymore? The guy that might not ever fuckin’ see again?” Billy bellowed, turning his face wildly to Steve, who lifted his head in surprise, somehow caught in Billy’s gaze even though it was vague and unfocused.

“No! No, that’s not—“

“WELL, THANK YOU, STEVE HARRINGTON! YOU’RE SUCH A FUCKIN’ ANGEL, AREN’T YA? *TAKIN’ PITY ON POOR BILLY-FUCKIN’-HARGROVE!*” Billy roared.

Steve stared, and Billy’s face stared back. He was breathing heavily.

Steve watched as two tears flicked down onto his cheeks, the September sun streaming in through the windshield catching them and making them glitter like little jewels. Billy clamped his mouth shut, his lips twisting, his Adam’s apple bobbing as though he were trying desperately to keep something from coming out.

Steve simply didn’t know what to say.

After a long minute Billy threw his head away from Steve, mashing his palms into his eye sockets, wiping away the evidence of his vulnerability, sniffing once in a determined sort of way. He clearly hadn’t meant to get so upset. His expression was unreadable.

Steve looked down at his hands on the steering wheel, and swallowed.

“I just know,” Steve began slowly, “That when I first saw one of those... Things... That I wasn’t okay for a long time. I had Nancy, and I had Jonathan, and I even had all the kids. Hell— I even had Mrs. Byers and Hopper. We all knew what really happened in Hawkins. If shit hit the fan, we all knew we could call each other, and we’d all come together, no questions asked.”

Billy was silent.

“You weren’t here the first time,” Steve whispered, remembering

driving up to the Byer's house full of stupid teenage angst and holding flowers. "Will Byers had gone missing. The government tried to cover it up, gave us a fake body and everything. We had a fucking funeral for him… But he was just lost… In the Upside Down. He was there for almost a week. I don't know how he managed to survive, but he did… And then Eleven saved him, brought him home… None of us were the same, in the year after. Me, I just…"

Steve let out a hollow laugh.

"I just tried to pretend like everything was… Alright, just totally fine. Nancy's best friend Barb had been killed in the Upside Down, and we were just pretending like she disappeared, like she ran off… Even though we knew she was dead. Her parents thought she was still alive and we had to lie to them even though we knew… And I just kept pretending like everything was perfectly fucking normal."

He licked his lips.

"I was a fucking coward, and I couldn't deal with the truth," Steve said, swallowing. "Then last year, when it… When it got Will… I had many moments where I wished it wasn't me who was running around behind some thirteen year olds with a baseball bat fighting literally the spawn of Satan. I was still a coward but I didn't want to back down, because I owed it to Barb. It was… It's really my fault she's dead. Nancy blames herself, but it was me. I was the one acting like a total jackass and goading her into doing shit she wouldn't normally do, and making Barb feel unwelcome… And I guess I've been trying to make it up to her since."

Silence reigned in the car.

"I guess… What I'm trying to say… Is that I didn't just come get you cause I felt bad… I also came because I know what you're going through."

Billy closed his eyes.

"You don't know what I'm going through, Harrington," he said softly.

Steve swallowed.

“Okay, fine... Maybe I don’t,” Steve admitted, blowing his bangs out of his face.

He lifted his head and looked at Billy.

“But,” he said sternly, feeling fired up and determined. “I know about what did this to you and I’m not your little sister. So— Basically, I’m the best option you’ve got if you wanna get through this.”

Nodding as though it was a closed matter, he turned the key in the ignition and the Camaro roared to life. He pulled out onto the road and started driving. Billy was quiet, but Steve was self consciously aware that his face was turned to him, and when he spared him a glance, he looked lost in thought.

Steve went for third, grinding the gears and wincing.

“Fuck!” he yelled.

Try as he might, he couldn’t get the gear shift right. It seemed like every time he pushed down on the clutch, the grind point was in a different place. He knew every car had its quirks, but this car had quirks that he couldn’t even predict. Billy didn’t say anything for a bit, letting them cruise at a comfortable 50 miles per hour down the trunk route that circuited town. Steve came up to a long curve and bit his lip, gently pushing down on the clutch while gearing down to take the turn.

“Push down harder,” Billy said quietly. For once, he wasn’t smoking, and his voice was clear as a bell.

Steve pushed the clutch. He downshifted, but it must have been too early, because the car gave a little yelp of protest.

He heard Billy let out a small breath of laughter beside him.

“Man,” Billy said, “You’re bad at this.”

His tone was lukewarm, but it was warmer than Steve had ever heard it. He felt a smile breaking out across his face.

“I’m... I’m really bad at this,” he agreed, a snort of laughter bubbling up inside him like a shaken soda can.

Billy leaned forward, his head turned vaguely to the left where Steve was sitting and bashing the gears together, his hand on the gearshift, trying to switch up for another long stretch of road.

Billy spoke up. “Just...”

Steve almost jumped out of the roof of the Camaro. Billy’s hand had come to rest firmly over the top of his own where it sat on the shift.

“Push the clutch...”

Steve pushed it.

“And shift...”

Billy’s hand guided his into second gear.

“Then the accelerator...”

Steve accelerated.

“Now slowly let go of the clutch.”

Steve let his foot fall away from the clutch.

The car shifted and accelerated with a satisfying growl, purring along the highway.

Steve let out a bark of thrilled laughter. “There we go!” he shouted before he could stop himself.

“There you go,” Billy agreed, his voice quiet. Steve could hear the small flicker of warmth in the way he said it, and for the first time

since he arrived at number 4819 Cherry Oak Road, he felt like going to visit Billy hadn't been a mistake.

4. “You Might Think” — The Cars (1984)

October 12th, 1985

Steve drove, the windows open, letting the cool early October breeze blow through the BMW as he cruised through the centre of town. The evening sun was warm and bright, shining down on him as he drove westward, passing stores, the library, and the town hall. Before the war, Hawkins had been a steel-mill town that had also boasted a few large textiles factories. These industries had faded long ago, but the skeletons of the abandoned factories remained, a large cluster of massive brick and mortar walls and crumbling smoke stacks gathered on the westernmost edge of the town limits. An influx of industry workers in the 1940s had grown up a small community of houses around the factory complexes to accommodate the families that had arrived seeking better fortunes. It was toward the crumbling walls and overgrown properties of the steel mills that Steve turned his car, heading toward Billy’s street. Cherry Oak drive stretched along an abandoned railway line that had led directly through the working-class neighbourhoods into the factory proper. As he turned on to Steel Mill Road, he passed by a few high school kids walking and laughing riotously down the street toward The Hawk Theatre. He gave them a cursory glance and sighed. Most of his old friends and acquaintances from school had left, headed for Indiana State, Ball, or elsewhere across the country.

His father had hounded him about re-applying to colleges. When the “unstable foundations” had ruined the Starcourt Mall, he had bummed around for the rest of the summer, his father under the impression that he was busy picking out where he’d spend the next four years of his life. He wasn’t. He’d had other things on his mind; namely, that Hopper was dead, and that Jonathan Byers and his whole family had moved away, bringing Eleven with them. Steve had watched them go and he couldn’t help but feel like they were taking their last defence against the Upside Down with them. They would all have been dead a hundred times over without El and her powers.

So he’d stayed. With Robin’s help, he’d gotten a job at the Family Video. When mid-August rolled around, his Dad had finally realized

that envelopes stamped with the crests of universities had not been arriving, because Steve hadn't applied to any. He'd tried to explain that he just wasn't ready, which was a veiled truth, but his father would hear nothing of it. He knew, eventually, that his father's fury would break and he would get to work for his company— But right now it was 12-6pm, Monday to Friday at Family Video on the Church Street plaza strip. He hadn't been able to bring himself to even consider leaving Hawkins. Not yet. He wasn't sure if it was even safe to leave, if the kids were safe... If Nancy was safe... If Billy, even, was safe. He'd taken on the responsibility of protecting Mike, Lucas, Max, and Dustin now that El and Hopper were gone. In a way, he was grateful for the tentative addition of Billy. As much as he could be a disagreeable asshole, he was strong and brave. If anything happened... He, Nancy, and Robin would need him.

That is, until Nancy left for school. He had no doubts that she would eventually leave Hawkins, get a scholarship to some prestigious college,, and become the investigative journalist that she was clearly destined to become. He was very happy for her, but couldn't shake the feeling that he was losing time. For all that his parents weren't really around in his last years of high school, he had always depended on the fact that he would work for his Dad's company, eventually inherit it, and buy a place of his own. He had been following a predestined road, the path towards his father's company like a vague impression on the blueprint of his life, always thinking that it was further away than it actually was. It felt like his graduation from high school had come about very suddenly, and his 'real life' had begun without him being really prepared for it. All of the things he'd counted on had been skewed, changed, different than what he had been expecting. His Dad was too furious with him to give him the job he'd been promised since he was ten, he lived in a world where monsters were real, and he was headed, for the third weekend in a row, to the house of a guy who had once beat him so bad he'd needed stitches.

As he drove, he had the thought that he was strangely grateful for the fact that his life hadn't turned out like his parent's. Sure, he was burdened with the knowledge of an alternate dimension... And sure, maybe his game with the ladies was suffering a bit... And yeah, maybe his only friend right now was Robin... He sighed. It wasn't his

parent's life, but nobody could say it wasn't unique. Most importantly, it was *his* .

It wasn't all bad.

He drove past the dark windows of an abandoned steelworks factory and swallowed. That was the place Billy had pointed out to him, the place where the Mind Flayer had pulled him into the darkness. He hadn't really spoken much about what he'd gone through, but Steve could tell that living so close to this place bothered him. The place where the Mind Flayer had lurked was only half a mile from the place where he laid his head down to sleep every night. Steve adjusted his shoulders uncomfortably and sped past it. He turned his signal light on and turned onto Cherry Oak. Halfway down the road, he slowed down, coming to a stop.

He flicked his sunglasses onto his head and rolled down the window, peering out. He saw Billy sitting on the cracked concrete of the front step, picking at the peeling white paint at his side, running his hands along the surface and flicking it with his finger. In his other hand he held a cigarette which he tapped onto the scrubby grass, his knees up by his chest. Steve noticed that he tended to dress more simply now, likely picking clothes he could identify by touch, like t-shirts and jeans. Today he was wearing a black muscle tee under a black leather jacket and light blue jeans, a pair of scuffed and torn black canvas sneakers on his feet.

Here goes nothin'...

The first drive he had taken Billy on had been awkward, emotional, weird, and... Good? Billy had been distant, angry, and cold for the majority of it, but then he'd sort of warmed up to him. He'd managed to finally figure out the Camaro's gearshift with Billy's help, and for the hour-long drive he'd taken Billy on afterward they'd shared a companionable silence. When he'd dropped Billy off, he'd taken him to the door and had quickly, on a whim, asked him if he wanted to go for a drive the following Saturday. Billy had seemed taken aback, and maybe that's why he'd agreed. Whatever the reason, he had taken Billy on a drive that weekend— which they had spent in relative, but not uncomfortable silence— and he'd shown up again this Saturday. This was the first time Billy had been waiting for him.

Steve looked at the clock on the dashboard. Three o'clock. Right on time.

He got out of the car and Billy's head swiveled a little at the noise.

"Hey," he greeted, walking up to Billy.

Billy only nodded. His expression was particularly grim today, which was saying something. The Mind Flayer had taken the fiery spark out of him, and Steve had only seen flickers of it since. Steve couldn't exactly blame him. He seemed to be constantly in that strange, low, sad state that had briefly overtaken him last year when he had met him outside of the Hawkins Middle School gym, when he'd apologized for beating him up. After his apology, Billy's swagger had returned, and their relationship (if you could call it that) was one of simple nods in the hallway. Billy went back to being the loud mouthed tail chaser that he'd been when he first got to Hawkins, and Steve went back to... Well, he hadn't really gone back to anything. He just lived.

"You ready to go?" Steve asked.

Billy turned his head toward the door, pausing a moment. He turned back to Steve.

"Yeah," he said, licking his lips. "Can we give Max a ride to the arcade?"

Steve blinked in surprise.

"Oh—yeah. No problem."

Billy nodded, standing and flicking his cigarette butt onto the ground, grinding it with his shoe. His aim was better this time.

"Max!" he called out. "C'mon!"

Max burst out of the door as though she had been waiting behind it and strode to Steve's car before either he or Billy could say a word. She opened the backseat door, got inside, and slammed it shut behind her. Billy rolled his eyes.

“She and Lucas are fighting or something, I dunno.”

Steve took Billy’s wrist, leading him to the passenger side, and went around and got in the driver’s seat.

“Alright, let’s go kiddos,” Steve said, trying to cut through the tense, dark cloud that was emanating from the back seat. He adjusted his sunglasses on his face, started the car, and drove off. He turned on the radio. Hawkins local broadcast, 101.7 “The Beat,” was jovially announcing the weather.

“ *And it’s another sunny Saturday here in Hawkins, sitting at a comfortable 54 degrees—tomorrow, mix of sun and cloud with a small chance of showers…* ”

He flicked his eyes in the rear view mirror. Max sat with her head against the seat, sullenly looking out the window, her red hair catching the breeze and fluttering around her shoulders.

“You okay, there, Mad Max?” Steve ventured after a few minutes.

Max rolled her eyes.

“Yes, *DAD* ,” she snarked, crossing her arms. “Everything is just *peachy* .”

Billy stayed silent.

“You wanna talk about it?” Steve pressed.

“No.”

“Okie doke,” he said, nodding. They came to the Church Street Plaza, and Steve parked in front of the arcade. Max got out without saying thank you, slamming the door, and disappeared into the building.

“Whew,” Steve whistled, grimacing, turning down the radio. “I would *not* wanna be Lucas right now…”

“She misses that Eleven girl,” Billy said, unprompted. “That was the only friend Max ever made that was a girl here.”

“Huh,” Steve muttered, backing out of the parking lot and driving down the road. “Did she have friends that were girls back in L.A.?”

“Dunno. She was super shy when I met her,” Billy shrugged.

Steve didn’t ask. He twisted his lips, feeling nervous, like he was toeing the edge of a threshold that he was hesitant to cross. The first Saturday and the last had felt like flukes, like something that was happening because of strange circumstances and wouldn’t happen again. This time felt different. Billy sitting and waiting for him on the step had made him feel like they were developing a routine, like these Saturday drives were something that maybe, just maybe, both he and Billy were looking forward to. He flicked his eyes over and watched as Billy yawned widely, his arm resting on the side of the door. He wondered, not for the first time, if in another life they could’ve been friends.

After a while he spoke up.

“Hey, uh, Billy… I was thinking. I’m kinda realizing that I don’t really know you, like. At all. The only thing I know we have in common so far is that we’re both okay at basketball, can drive cars, and know about the alternate dimension thing… And, I dunno…”

Steve chuckled awkwardly. From afar, it had seemed like he was good friends with Tommy and the rest of the guys, but… Something nagged at him and told him this wasn’t true. Tommy just wanted to feel powerful, and Steve had learned firsthand that he dropped you the second he thought you weren’t. Maybe Tommy had dropped Billy, too… Or maybe Billy hadn’t even tried to make any friends at all. He licked his lips, continuing. “It kinda seems like a flimsy start to a friendship, y’know?”

Steve turned his signal light on, going their usual route around the circuit. Billy leaned over and rolled down the window, his tongue darting across his lips. He didn’t answer for a while, taking a cigarette from the pack in his pocket and lighting it, his hair fluttering in the breeze. He looked sort of sleepy and out of sorts.

“Friendship, huh?” Billy asked eventually. “That’s what this is, huh

Harrington?"

"Well— I dunno man, that's what I'm saying. I mean— It *could* be," Steve said, shrugging, grimacing at Billy's flat tone. "You don't... You don't think we'd have been able to be friends if things were different?"

Billy didn't deign that with an answer. Steve made a frustrated noise in his throat.

"Fine. *Okay* . Maybe we wouldn't. But... For the sake of my boredom, how about I ask you a question, and you ask me a question, and we'll go back and forth until we're both sure we would *definitely* never be friends if we hadn't had to stop the world from ending."

"You wanna play twenty questions? Seriously?"

"Yeah!" Steve said, nodding and smirking. "Yeah, fuck it. I wanna play twenty questions."

Billy snorted derisively. "Whatever."

"Alright...," Steve said, emboldened by Billy's nonchalance. "Hm. Okay— I'll start... Give me three of your favourite bands."

"Metallica, Judas Priest, and Queen."

"Queen's a nice touch," Steve smiled, nodding. "Okay, your turn."

"Your three favourite bands," Billy smirked around his cigarette.

Steve looked at him and made a bemused noise. "Really? You're just gonna repeat the questions I ask you?" he asked, snorting. "Alright. Alright. Uh... Duran Duran, the Pretenders, and we have a match! Queen."

"God," Billy snorted. "You're a fuckin' cliche, Harrington, you know that? Your BMW? *Duran Duran* ? Jesus Christ..."

Steve rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, alright… 'Cause you're not the biggest cliche that ever fucking

walked the earth…"

Billy turned to him, his eyebrows furrowed, a small sneer on his face.

"What the hell do you mean?" he demanded.

"Oh, come *on* ," Steve snorted, patting the steering wheel. "The hair, the necklace, the earring... The *car* ... The shirts all unbuttoned? What, did you just watch a bunch of pornos about bad boys who come to fix naked ladies' plumbing and copy their look exactly?"

"Been watching a lot of porn with bad boys in them, have you, Stevie?" Billy mocked, quick as a whip.

"I dunno man, you're the one with the earring," Steve fired right back, reaching out and flicking the silver hoop hanging from his left ear.

Billy flinched away from Steve.

"That's not the *gay ear* , dumbass! That's the right ear."

"I mean, I'll take your word for it," Steve shrugged. "You obviously know more about it than me."

Billy clenched his jaw, a dark and stormy look stealing over his features as he looked away.

"I'm not a fuckin' faggot," he sneered to the floor of the BMW.

Steve thought of Robin, how she had become his best friend, how she had trusted him enough to confess that she was gay, and immediately regretted what he'd said.

"I'm sorry, Billy," he muttered, sighing. "I shouldn't have said that."

Billy was silent. A long few moments passed before he finally spoke up again.

"Freddie Mercury is a god. I saw him. In 1982, back home in Los Angeles. Billy Squire was with him," Billy said, his voice level. Steve

blinked, surprised. He hadn't expected him to offer the olive branch so quickly. Steve's eyes widened like saucers, smiling. He'd have given anything to see Queen.

"Holy shit, dude."

"He was wearing white, all white. Sneakers, a white jacket. He had the moustache by that point. It was..."

Steve could tell Billy was struggling with words. Other than expressing his disdain or giving out insults, he had never actually heard Billy talk about something that he loved— Ever.

"I dunno," Billy said, shrugging, giving up.

Steve could see the profound affect this concert had had on him. His whole body had seemed more alert than it had been in a while.

"You're so lucky," Steve said, shaking his head. Billy inclined his head a little.

"Okay. Uh... Your favourite toy as a kid," Steve said, continuing his line of inquiry.

"My surfboard," Billy said, his voice strange, maybe even a little wistful. Steve, sensed some emotions behind this statement, and didn't ask further. "Yours?"

"Uh," Steve laughed. "I had those Weeble things.. I have no idea why, but I fucking loved them."

" *Weebles wobble* —" Billy recited.

"— *but they don't fall down* ," Steve laughed, finishing the jingle. "Yeah."

Steve tried to think of another question.

"Hm. How about... Your favourite season?"

For the next hour, Billy and Steve traded questions and answers. Steve found out that Billy liked summer the best, that his favourite

holiday was the Fourth of July (not for any patriotic reasons, but because it was an excuse to party and it was in the summer), that he'd been an avid surfer in California, that he hated Ronald Reagan because his Dad loved him, and that he watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas* every year.

"I do that too!" Steve exclaimed, laughing. "I started watching it in my room cause I was embarrassed to still watch it even though my Mom loves it."

Billy gave a small shrug, and Steve couldn't tell if he was agreeing or just uncomfortable.

"What did you want to be when you grew up?" Steve asked.

Billy looked at him. "I don't think it matters anymore," he said quietly.

Steve felt his gut clench. "Well, no. It doesn't. We never end up what we thought we were gonna be like..."

Billy snorted derisively. "Whatever, Harrington."

"Well, I mean, it's true!"

"Maybe for you! *Your* life is laid out for you," Billy ground out angrily, fixing Steve with an unseeing eye. " *Daddy's boy* . Let's face it — Worse comes to worse, you just beg your dad to hire you on, and bam! You're fuckin' set for life."

Steve knew he was right, but he also felt like he was wrong at the same time. He knew he would always have his Dad to fall back on, if worse came to worse, but in the months since he graduated he'd begun to depend on that less and less. The truth was that he both desperately wanted the security of his father's money just as much as that reliance disgusted him. His selfish and shallow behaviour had cost Barbara her life. Selling expensive cars to yuppies and other douchebags just didn't feel as fulfilling when you had fought hell itself.

"Hey man, do you see me working with him? No. My Dad owns a dealership, I got everything I wanted as a kid, I was a spoiled brat...

And yet, I work at the Video Store, I didn't re-apply to any colleges because I'm scared to leave this shithole town, and my best friends are my ex girlfriend, a sassy lesbian, and a gaggle of dorky teens..."

"Oh, poor fucking King Steve," Billy jeered. "It must be so fuckin' hard to be spoiled and have anything you fuckin' want. Yeah, I'm cryin' for you man. I'm so sorry you get to choose when you get to leave *Sucking* , Indiana and run off to whatever college you want. That must be real rough."

"First of all, I won't get in to any colleges, because I'm too stupid or something," Steve cried out, exasperated. "Second of all, that's not what I meant, and you know it! I just mean that life turns out weird. It goes in ways you don't expect, okay?"

Steve sighed, frustrated, catching Billy's mutinous expression when he flicked his eyes over to him briefly. "Look. I get it! You're right! I'm a fucking douchebag, I— I was a total dick to everyone, my whole life. I've never had it hard. But that doesn't change the fact that hell itself unloaded like a hot pot of soup all over my fucking lap! I don't— I don't even know what the fuck I want anymore," Steve ranted, unconsciously revving the engine of the BMW and steadily picking up speed. "Everything is totally fucked! And yeah! I don't have it as bad as you, you're right! But, for fuck's sake Billy! *I'm just trying to be your fucking friend!"*

Billy was silent. Steve felt his heart pumping double time in his chest, fury, frustration, and sadness vying for dominance. He was disgusted with himself, feeling like he wanted to cry. Billy's words had rattled him, speaking exactly what his own self-deprecating thoughts had been over the last few months. A long time passed in the car as he drove, mindless to where he was going, his brain fizzing with emotions. He knew he was a dumb, spoiled rich boy. He knew he had life easy, that things had always gone his way, that now it was his turn to suffer a little bit... He finally looked over at Billy. He was leaning back in the seat, his eyes staring straight forward, a small frown on his face.

Steve eventually swallowed his pride, and spoke up.

"Sorry," he grumbled. "I just thought... I just thought it'd be nice to

know somebody who gets it. I guess I overstepped."

"I don't have any friends," Billy replied quietly. He flicked his cigarette out the window. It had burned down to his fingers. It seemed like he'd forgotten it.

"What, like as a rule?" Steve snorted.

Billy didn't answer. After a while, he spoke up, lighting another smoke.

"Robin Buckley's a lesbo?" Billy asked around the cigarette hanging in the corner of his mouth.

Steve felt as if someone had doused him in ice water, the sweat that had built up in his raging tirade going frigid on his skin. He had been so preoccupied with trying to convince Billy that he wasn't his enemy that he must have let slip something he had been sworn to secrecy never to reveal. Not only that, but he had told Robin's secret to one of the meanest motherfuckers in Hawkins. He swallowed.

"Oh, no... I just said that like... As a joke. It's an inside joke between me and her," he shrugged, licking his lips, trying desperately to play it off.

"She's kinda weird and artsy, you know. Makes sense that she's gay," Billy said, completely ignoring him. "A lot of chicks like her are gay."

The high emotions that had been running since he picked Billy up came bubbling back, and Steve felt a fury the likes of which he had never felt before crash over him like a violent wave. Steve slammed on the brakes of the BMW, causing the car behind them to lay on the horn and pass, its driver giving him the finger. He turned to Billy, wrenching in his seat to stare at him.

"I swear to fucking *God* , Billy Hargrove, if you tell anybody... *ANYBODY* ... That I told you Robin was gay, I will fucking *find you* and make you *wish* that Mind Flayer thing had managed to *rip you apart* ."

Steve was breathing hard, his voice reaching a grumbling, dark low he never thought was possible. His heart was pumping a mile a minute in his chest and he felt like he had molten lava flowing in his veins. He had accidentally broken the bond of trust that he had forged with Robin, and there was no way he was going to let this rat mullet piece of shit cause her any suffering because of it. He breathed like a bull in Billy's face, which had become very serious. After a few moments, he turned back around in his seat and looked away. He slammed the BMW into drive and took off like a bat out of hell, disgusted with himself. He wrenched the steering wheel and turned right onto the next road.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Billy said calmly. "I don't even know who Robin is, remember? We've never met."

"Good," Steve growled fiercely.

Steve accelerated, too upset with himself and riled up to pay much attention to where he was going. They made their way around the neighbourhoods of Hawkins, weaving in and out of the suburbs and winding avenues.

After a long time Billy spoke.

"My best friend was gay," he said simply. "Back in L.A."

Steve was jolted out of his furious reverie very suddenly, taken aback by this confession.

"Oh— Really?"

"Yeah," he said quietly. "Harley."

Steve attempted to reconcile the image of Billy, staggering drunk on one too many keg stands at a party and licking his lips at girls with what he knew of gay guys. Admittedly, this was not much. He immediately thought of a flamboyant guy in a feather boa, but then his acquaintance with Robin gave him pause. She wasn't at all what he thought a lesbian looked like. Maybe this Harley guy wasn't like that. But still— The image of a guy dressed flamboyantly like David Bowie or Prince standing next to the Camel-stinking, leather booted

masculine gravitas of Billy Hargrove was a strange and funny image.

“I won’t tell anyone,” Billy said, his voice tinged with a sadness Steve didn’t understand. “I’m not that much of an asshole.”

Steve found that once again, against his better judgement, that he trusted him.

After another twenty minutes of driving, Steve turned his wheel back to the strip to get Max. When he pulled into the parking lot, he saw her standing under the awning of the arcade, her fists buried in the pockets of her coat, her hair fluttering in the breeze. Her face was flushed, as though she had been recently upset by something. Steve pulled up and waved. She got into the backseat of the car, a plastic bag from Walgreens swinging on her arm. She shoved it between her legs, crossed her arms tightly, and resolutely looked out the window.

“You have fun at the arcade? Let off some steam?” Steve asked her brightly as he pulled out onto the road, knowing he sounded like a hopeful Dad checking on his moody teenager. He ran with it. That’s what he was nowadays, anyway.

“Yeah. Arcade was great,” she replied dully.

“Run some errands too, huh? Good idea,” Steve continued lightly.

He watched, mystified, as her face became mottled red, her legs shoving the plastic bag even further down into the carpet behind Billy’s seat with her leg. Because he was looking back at her, he didn’t see the car pulling out onto the road until the last second. He slammed on the breaks. Billy fell forward a little, catching himself on the dashboard.

“What the hell?” he yelled, leaning back again, pulling the seat belt away from his neck. Billy didn’t normally use seatbelts, but Steve had insisted.

“Goddamnit!” Steve yelled, flipping the offending car the bird. He set off again.

“Sorry about that... You okay back there?” he asked, keeping his eyes glued on the road this time.

“Yes,” Max replied, her voice very small.

“Hey, if you hit your head or something that’s okay,” Steve said soothingly.

“I’m fine!” she bit, but she still sounded like she was going to burst into tears. “My bag just went under the seat.”

“We’ll get it when we stop,” Steve assured her, perplexed at her reaction. She was normally a very calm person, with a scathing wit to go with it. Something must have really rattled her. Maybe she and Lucas were done for good this time. They drove in silence. When Steve finally stopped outside of their house, Max threw herself down onto the floor and scrabbled for her bag. It was too far ahead for her reach, so Billy bent hissing lightly in pain, reaching for it. He pulled out a plastic bag that was a little worse for wear, the item inside having gotten crushed by the seat. As he pulled, some of its contents spilled out onto the carpet at his feet. Steve, watching all this, felt his eyes go wide. From a box inside the bag, a couple of maxi pads tumbled out. Billy heard them fall, and reached for one, touching it. He froze. Steve flicked his eyes to the backseat where Max had jumped up, ready to grab the bag from Billy’s hand. Steve clenched his jaw. This was going to be bad. There was no way Billy wouldn’t torment her. There was no way this was ending peacefully.

He watched as Billy’s hands quickly shoved the strewn maxi pads into the box, turning his broad shoulders so Max wouldn’t see, and put them back in the bag. He clutched the handle together, and held it out to her. Max still looked like she was going to cry, but she seemed to have missed the fact that her feminine hygiene products had spilled out at her step brothers feet.

“Thanks,” she said, grabbing the bag and scrambling out of the car, slamming the door behind her. She ran to the house and went inside.

Billy blinked rapidly and leaned back in the passenger seat.

“Lord help me,” he muttered.

“I don’t think she saw that they spilled,” Steve informed him.

“Right,” Billy grunted. “If she did see that... Well, she’d just have to murder me. I dunno what other options she’d have...”

Steve felt a small smile growing slowly on his face. He was oddly touched by this gesture, this uncharacteristic desire Billy seemed to have to save Max from embarrassment. Steve certainly was uncomfortable with the whole thing, unsure how to handle it, but Billy seemed to be taking it in stride. It was quite sweet, really.

“Hey,” Steve laughed, punching Billy lightly on the arm. “You’re not so bad.”

“Oh, no. I’m bad. Now that I know she’s got those I’m gonna stick them to her head when she’s not looking,” Billy assured him, a small smirk on his face.

Steve snorted. “Yeah,” he agreed, his eyes sparkling. “You’re bad, alright.”

October 15th, 1985

Steve locked the doors to the Family Video and jumped up on the front counter as Robin counted the till, waiting until she was finished before he spoke up.

“Hey,” he said.

She gave him a look. “Yes?”

“I kinda wanna go on a day trip this Saturday,” he said. “You wanna go?”

“Where would we be going?” she asked, sorting the bills.

“I was thinkin’ Indianapolis, do some shopping?”

“Aren’t Saturday’s when you and Billy go on your dates?” she asked, flicking her eyes up and smirking.

“Oh, ha ha...,” Steve said, rolling his eyes “Yeah, that’s when I usually take him on a drive...”

“So?” she prompted.

“So?”

“Well— Did you cancel with him, or should I expect a psycho in the backseat of your car when you come pick me up?” she asked, rolling her eyes and stuffing the bills in a bag.

Steve sighed. “That’s what I’m sort of wondering about. I haven’t invited him yet... I kinda wanted to see how you felt about it.”

Robin made a face. The Family Video was closed and they were completely alone, but even so, he watched as her eyes flicked around self-consciously.

“I dunno,” she shrugged, a little frown turning the corners of her lips. “I’m just... I don’t know. I mean, you’ve had okay times with him, but you’re a guy, and you used to be like him in a lot of ways... I just... I dunno.”

Steve put his hand on her shoulder.

“Hey,” he said gently. “I don’t have to invite him. We can go— Just you and I.”

Robin gave him a small smile.

“Yeah, that might be nice... The thing is, I’m also kind of... Curious?” she laughed, tilting her head and looking up into the ceiling. “Does that make sense?”

“I guess,” Steve said, bemused.

“I mean, I would have never, in a thousand years, expected to become friends with Steve Harrington,” she said, shrugging, looking back down to the bag of money. “And... You’re silly but you’re a good guy. Billy is… I dunno. He’s so fucking macho, you know? Ugh. I’m just wondering if he’ll be a dick to me ‘cause I’m a weird girl whose gay.”

“I don’t think he will, to be honest,” Steve shrugged, keeping the fact that he accidentally let slip that Robin was gay to himself. He shifted

nervously on the counter. “He actually told me his best friend back in L.A. was gay,” Steve blurted out, the words coming out of his guilty conscience.

Robin’s eyebrows shot to her forehead. If she suspected what he had done, it didn’t show on her face. “Wow, really?” She snorted and blinked, smiling. “I can’t picture that.”

“I know! I was surprised too. But... I mean, if that was his best friend...”

Robin turned to him and smiled a little.

“What? You think he’s gay?”

Steve blinked rapidly, furrowing his brows. That had never occurred to him. No... There was no way. Billy chased way too many skirts for him to be gay.

“No, I don’t think so... I mean... Look at all the chicks he’s dated since he got here...”

Robin gave him an all-knowing look and shrugged.

“I dunno, man,” she said, chuckling. “Who knows? I don’t look gay, do I? Nerdy and sad, yes, but gay?”

Steve inclined his head. “Yeah, I mean... Yeah, I guess... I don’t think he is, though. He talked about some chick he used to date back in L.A., he was pretty into her I think...”

“Doesn’t mean anything,” Robin muttered under her breath, smiling.

Steve was thrown for a loop, as he often was when he talked with Robin. She was smart as hell, and well extremely well spoken— She would make a great lawyer someday, if she ever wished that to be her calling. She talked circles around him half the time, that was for sure.

“Billy’s sexual history aside,” Steve sighed, exasperated. “Do you want to go on a day trip or not?”

“Yes, I’d like to go,” she laughed. “And, sure, Whatever. Ask Billy. You’ve been hanging out with him so much, it’s only a matter of time before we end up in the same room together. Might as well find out we hate each other speeding down the freeway, right?”

Steve shook his head, smiling, jumping off of the counter and following her as she walked to the back room toward the safe.

“Are you sure?” he asked her.

She bent down and opened the safe, putting the money in. She glanced up at him.

“Well? What do you think? I think you know him better than most people at this point... Do you think he’d just be a total dickhead the whole time, or do you think we’d be okay?” she asked.

“Well, he’ll definitely be a dickhead the whole time, but probably not to you,” Steve shrugged. “He kinda backs off if you sass him back. That’s how Max got him to behave… And since you’re literally incapable of being anything but sarcastic, you should be okay.”

Robin snorted, shrugging. “I trust your judgement. You also know me better than most people too, so...”

That was definitely true. You didn’t get tortured by Russians, confess your feelings, come out of the closet, and defeat a hell beast without becoming better friends.

“Well,” Steve said, crossing his arms. “You guys are pretty different, but you’re both sarcastic, obnoxious, and kinda hyper, so... Either you’ll end up hating each other’s guts, or you’ll ditch me and stop being my friend ‘cause I’m too boring.”

Robin stood up, laughing, kicking the safe shut.

“Oh, now I *have* to know,” she chortled, turning around to write the profits in the chart on the table.

Steve leaned against the wall while she wrote.

“I gotta warn you, though... He’s kinda... Quieter than he used to be.

I think he's sorta depressed..."

"Welcome to the club..." Robin muttered.

Steve rolled his eyes.

"I'm just letting you know. I really don't think he'll be mean to you—Actually, I think he's more likely to be mean to *me* than to you..."

"You've definitely sold me on this venture now," she grinned, smacking him on the arm and getting up, walking toward her locker.

"Hey!" Steve exclaimed.

Robin giggled, grabbing her coat. Steve grabbed his, shoving his arms through the sleeves.

"What time were you thinking?" she asked him as they walked out of the store, the keys jingling as Robin locked it shut for the night.

"Uh, like eight in the morning?"

Robin groaned.

"What? It's a two hour drive, if we want to get the most out of it we should leave early!"

"You are such a mom," Robin snickered. "Ugh... Fine. Eight in the morning works for me."

They walked to Steve's car, and got in. Steve pulled out of the parking lot and made his way toward the south side of town, toward Robin's place. She lived in a small, old farm house at the end of a long driveway surrounded by a few acres of fields cut into the thick forest. Her mother was a farmer by trade, and raised a few chickens and grew corn and potatoes. Robin had a younger brother who lived with them, a reclusive punky kid that Steve had seen only briefly when he'd come in once. Unlike her mother and brother, Robin did not have a green thumb and did not enjoy any aspect of farming, though she dutifully helped her mother with the eggs on weekends. While her mom and little brother could make anything grow, Robin had once told him that she only had to look at a plant for too long

before it withered. He pulled into her driveway and stopped next to the house, the porch light pooling onto the peeling white paint of the deck and onto the gravel drive. Steve personally felt a little creeped out by how far away the house was from anything, set deep into the middle of two fields, but he had always lived in a populated suburb. The emptiness made him feel uneasy.

“Alright,” she said, turning to him and smiling. “I’ll see you at 8am on Saturday?”

“Yeah! I’ll come get you first. I gotta ask Billy, but I’ll be here at 8 regardless.”

“Alright!” she chirped, getting out of the car and waving to him. He watched until she went inside and turned the BMW around in the small dirt cul-de-sac that had been worn into the grass in front of the house. He turned back onto the highway and drove toward town.

As he drove, he realized that he didn’t know Billy’s number.

October 16th, 1985

The next day on his break at the Family Video, Steve grabbed the Hawkins County phone book from the staff room and got to work. As he chewed a sloppy hamburger from the McDonald’s across the street, he flipped the pages and arrived at the H section. He slid his finger down the page.

Harbenson... Hardee... Hargrove!

Steve took a pen and paper and scribbled the number down, slamming the phone book shut and grabbing his French fries. His boss George flipped his shit if he used the company phone for personal calls, so he walked toward the doors, passing by the man himself, who was helping a sour looking old lady pick between *Sophie’s Choice* and *Terms of Endearment.* He gave Steve a look.

“Fifteen minutes, Harrington! Fifteen!” he mouthed angrily.

Steve rolled his eyes and put up his hands placatingly, nodding, going

outside. The air was brisker than it had been the week before, autumn closing in quickly on them. He walked over to the pay phone near the entrance to the store and dug in his pocket for some change. He plunked in two dimes, just to be safe, and picked up the phone. He looked at the number scrawled onto the piece of paper and dialled it. The phone rang three times, and Steve was just about to hang up so he could get a refund when someone finally picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hey, is this Billy?” Steve asked.

“... Is that you, Harrington?”

“Yeah, it’s me!”

“How’d you get my number?”

“Phone book?”

“Why?”

“Uh, cause I wanted to call you?” Steve shrugged, closing his eyes and shaking his head. Billy could be really obtuse when he wanted to be.

“...Why?”

Steve rolled his eyes.

“I’m just calling cause me and Robin Buckley – You know, that girl you know nothing about? – We’re going to Indianapolis this Saturday for the day and I was wondering if you wanted to come with?”

There was a pause.

“Alright,” Billy agreed. “What time?”

“Eight AM!” Steve informed him, feeling strangely relieved and elated that Billy had agreed to come with them.

“Eight in the fuckin’ morning? Jesus...,” Billy groaned. A grin split

onto Steve's face. Maybe he and Robin were more alike than he'd thought.

"Well, we don't want to waste the day..."

"Yeah yeah..."

"Alright, I'm gonna go grab Robin first, and then I'll come get you? I shouldn't be too long. Fifteen minutes maybe?" Steve said.

"Yeah, alright," Billy said, and Steve could have sworn he had heard him holding back a yawn.

"Were you sleeping?" Steve snorted. It was one in the afternoon.

"I mean, not a lot for me to do nowadays other than nap," Billy said, a little annoyed.

"Fair enough," Steve said hastily, back-pedalling. He supposed he was right.

"See you on Saturday?"

"Yeah. See you Saturday," Billy repeated back to him.

"Okay! Bye," Steve said, and he hung up the phone. He clicked the refund button for good measure but nothing came out. He shrugged. It was always worth a try.

That conversation hadn't gone so bad. They'd avoided a fight at the very least. If they kept going like this, they might actually end up being real friends. Steve shoved his fries into his face and went back into the store, chucking the empty carton into the garbage can by the door. George rapped the gold watch on his hairy arm, giving Steve a murderous look. Steve raised his hands and hurried to the back room, wiping his salty fingers on his jeans, and clocked back in. As the afternoon wore on, his mind kept flickering back to what Billy had said to him earlier on the phone. *There isn't much else to do...* Steve supposed there wouldn't be. Billy couldn't really go anywhere. He wasn't used to being blind, and the uncertainty of how long it was going to take to heal probably waylaid any attempts to get used to it. Maybe if it ended up being more permanent he'd have to get a dog,

or a cane— But the healing wounds were holding him back from doing much of anything. He could listen to music… He could maybe listen to movies, but what if the characters moved silently, or used body language? He wouldn't know what was going on.

Steve had never thought about that before. How did people who couldn't see enjoy movies?

Steve put back a brand new VHS copy of *Return of the Living Dead* , and had a thought. Maybe *he* could describe the movie— Let the dialogue be dialogue, but pause it in places and tell him what was going on. Whether or not Billy would agree to it was a totally different story, but Steve thought it might be worth trying. His boss gave him a glare, and he hurried to put the tape back on the shelf.

At five o'clock he clocked out and ran to the pay phone, shoving a dime into the slot and dialing Billy's number.

"Hello?"

"Sorry— It's me again. Do you have any plans for Halloween?"

[Note: described video for the visually impaired was only piloted in the late 1980s and was first used widely in the 1990s. One of the first films to have special narrated segments was Forrest Gump (1994)].

October 19th, 1985

Robin looked dead, her eyes half-shut, as she walked over to Steve's car and opened the door.

She was wearing a big grey wool coat with the sleeves rolled up, her hair teased, a little mini ponytail flopping on top of her head. Her feet were shoved into a pair of big black boots, and a loose white blouse was tucked casually into a pair of blue jeans. Her usual chain necklaces clinked at her neckline as she sat down. Steve smiled at her. He didn't usually get to see her wear the clothes that she actually wanted to wear. She closed the door, buckled her seatbelt, and leaned her head back, closing her eyes.

“Hey, fashionista,” he teased, nudging her. She only groaned.

“It’s too early...,” she muttered.

“Aww,” Steve teased, smiling. “Poor baby...”

Steve was a morning person, which apparently was a crime among the people his age. Since age twelve he had been the subject of glares and disgusted looks when he popped awake at 7am at sleepovers and parties.

“Billy was all disgusted we were leaving at eight, too,” Steve told her, chuckling, going down the long driveway through the chilly October morning mist.

“Yeah, that’s because he’s normal,” she groaned, her eyes still closed.

“No he isn’t,” Steve snorted. “You literally called him a psycho like three days ago.”

“I was wrong,” she yawned, as Steve turned onto the road. “Totally wrong. You’re the psycho.”

He drove toward Cherry Oak drive, across town.

“We’re gonna get breakfast, right?” Robin said dully, half asleep.

“Yes, we’ll get breakfast,” Steve chuckled. “Just chill, we’re almost to Billy’s.”

He pulled onto Cherry Oak and stopped outside the house, mist settling across the leaf-strewn lawn. It was light out, the grey sky promising rain. On the step, shivering a little and smoking a cigarette, was Billy. He was wearing blue jeans and his leather jacket, a hoodie on underneath.Steve got out of the car and went to get him, leading him to the backseat.

“Sorry, dude, you’re in the backseat today,” he told him. Billy shrugged, looking very tired, and slid along to sit in the middle. Steve got back into the driver’s seat and started the engine, driving off. Billy’s head leaned backward on the seat, his legs splayed, his hands akimbo on the leather beside him. He looked over to Robin. She was

leaning back, her mouth open, her eyes closed. He could have sworn he heard her snore softly.

Steve snorted under his breath, heading toward the freeway.

Steve munched on his breakfast sandwich, riding shotgun. In the driver's seat, Robin was coming to life slowly, sipping her black coffee. In the backseat, Billy was chewing loudly, alternating between taking a puff of his smoke and devouring a french fry. Steve opened the window of the car to let some of the smog out.

"Hey, smokestack," Steve called to the back seat through his full mouth, grimacing. "I don't think I ordered ash in my fuckin' sandwich."

"So'h," he called back, presumably an apology. He leaned over and opened the window behind Robin a crack, the leather of his jacket squeaking as he sat back up.

Robin downed her coffee and smacked her lips, putting the styrofoam cup in the cup holder and smacking the steering wheel.

"Ugh, that's better. Gimme my sandwich," she said, gesturing to Steve with a hand. He handed it to her. She devoured it, bits of sausage sprinkling down onto the floor of the car.

"God, can you guys be any more disgusting? Seriously, come on. I gotta clean this after..."

"Sow'hee Stee," Robin garbled around her sandwich.

Steve held back a laugh, finishing his breakfast. As he sipped his coffee, the sun managed to break through the grey cloud cover, winking at them. All around, wheat fields and trees were resplendent in golds and reds that were bright against the tin grey sky.

"I'm Robin, by the way," Robin said, introducing herself, leaning a hand back behind her and tapping Billy on the knee. Billy grunted and shook it.

"Billy Hargrove," he said bluntly.

“I know,” Robin snorted.

“You were a band geek, right?” Billy asked her.

“Yeah, one of those sad little nerds. I’m still a band geek, actually. Unfortunately, the law and my mother have dictated that I have to attend school until grade twelve.”

Billy nodded, an unlit cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

“You smoke?” he asked her.

Steve shook his head vigorously at her, waving his hand near his neck. Billy’s smokes were disgusting.

“Sometimes,” Robin smirked.

“Here.”

Billy put another cigarette in his mouth and lit them both, handing her one of them carefully.

“Oh my god, I can’t believe we’re like, totally kissing right now,” she said, putting on a valley girl voice and taking the cigarette from him, putting it between her lips.

“I’m sorry it had to be your first,” Billy smirked lazily.

Robin looked offended, letting out a small laugh.

“Okay, what makes you think this is my first kiss?” she demanded.

“You just said you were a band geek,” Billy shrugged.

“Oh, so band geeks don’t have sex drives, I see,” she said sarcastically.

“Yeah, why else would you be in band?” Billy snorted, teasingly, his eyes glinting.

“You wouldn’t believe that if you went to band camp...,” Robin muttered under her breath.

Billy shrugged, putting his boot into the back of Robin's seat, pushing on it, trying to annoy her. She ignored him completely, changing the subject.

"You know what I'm wondering, Billy?" Robin said suddenly, looking at Steve.

"What are you wondering, Robin?"

"I'm wondering what Steve did all those years to get so many dates," she said, smirking with mirth. "Because i haven't been on any, and you've been on way too many—"

Billy snorted.

"But Steve here, dreamboat Steve— Just what is his secret? The people need to know..."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Alright. I get it. I haven't been on a date in a long time. I suck."

"Well, maybe it's your method, Steve," Robin mocked consolingly. "Maybe you just need some hot tips. You know, refresh your juju."

"What, are you gonna give me hot tips, there, band geek?" Steve asked her, poking her on the arm.

"No, I'm going to sit here in awe of Steve 'The Hair' Harrington's methods and finally, maybe, my days as a sullen wallflower will finally be over," she said, grinning sarcastically.

"They called you Steve 'The Hair' Harrington?" Billy asked mockingly.

"Yes. My hair's perfect."

"That's fuckin' lame. You know what they called me at my old school?"

"What?" Robin asked.

"Pussy destroyer," said Billy.

“No they did not,” Steve exclaimed. “You’re a fuckin’ liar.”

Billy cackled.

“Alright, Mr. Hair, fess up. Give us some lines. Give us your method. What do ya say that makes those panties wet?” Billy asked, turning his head to the left curiously, a cocky smile on his face.

Steve rolled his eyes. “I just go with the flow, alright? Get a feel for it. See where she’s at.”

“Well, if she’s feelin’ it, then what d’you do?” Billy asked, exhaling smoke from his nose.

“I just go up to her and I kinda... I dunno, I like flick my eyes downward and back up again and smile and stuff,” Steve said, shrugging. “Like, act all coy, you know?”

Robin turned her head, looking at him incredulously.

“What? No you don’t! At Scoops you were so fucking weird!” she snorted. “Billy, one time he turned around and yelled ‘AHOY LADIES! I’m Steve Harrington!’ at some girls, it was so fucking embarrassing…”

“Robin, Scoops is not a good place to pick up chicks, okay?”

“Alright, alright... Fine,” she said, rolling her eyes and looking at Billy in the rear view mirror where he was smirking devilishly. “Okay, pussy destroyer, what do you do?”

“Well, first,” he said, leaning forward, putting his elbows on either side of the two front seats. “I talk a little quieter. You know, girls, they wanna feel special, right? So I lean in...”

Steve turned in his seat, his eyebrows raised, watching as Billy leaned his head in closer.

“And then I make sure I look a little coy, like you, Steve... But I make sure I’m smiling a little, cause she knows what I want, and she wants it too…”

His voice was a little quiet, a little teasing.

“And then I say...”

Steve felt himself lean in. He could smell Billy’s cologne, something vaguely familiar. He could see the pores on his cheeks. When had Billy come so close?

“Then I say...” Billy murmured, and Steve could feel his breath on his face, pungent, coffee and cigarettes setting his nose on fire.

“WANNA FUCK?” Billy bellowed.

Steve jumped back in surprise. “JESUS CHRIST!” he yelled.

Robin cackled in the driver’s seat.

“Direct,” she said, through fits of laughter. “I can get behind that.”

Steve slammed the back of his head against the passenger seat, confused, amazed, shocked at how easy it was for Billy to draw him in like that. What had he done? What had even happened?!

“Steve!” Robin called.

“What?” he asked.

“I asked you what you do when you get ready for a date,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Well... First I take a shower,” Steve began, clearing his throat, trying to recover. “Then I shave—“

“Shave everywhere?” Billy interrupted, a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

“Wh-what?” Steve asked, confused, turning around again to look at Billy.

“I said, do you shave everywhere?” Billy repeated.

Robin flicked her eyes over to Steve.

“He’s asking you if you shave your testicles,” she explained, as if she were talking to a child.

“Wha— Do you?” Steve asked Billy, flabbergasted.

“Of course I shave my nuts, I’m not a fuckin’ animal,” Billy scoffed.

“Wh— well. I—” Steve stuttered. He paused. “To be honest with you, I don’t really have a lot of hair.”

“Oh. Lucky,” Billy shrugged. “Continue.”

Steve sent a bemused look Billy’s way.

“Uh, then I do my hair— uh. I use Farrah Fawcett hairspray—“

“Farrah Fawcett?” Robin choked, snorting.

“Yes. That’s the secret ingredient to Steve ‘The Hair’ Harrington’s look. Farrah Fawcett. Now you know. If you tell anyone, I’ll kill you.”

“You know,” Billy said musingly. “When we’d be playin’ basketball or some shit, I’d get a whiff of something really flowery and I couldn’t figure out what the fuck it was.”

“Farrah Fawcett!” Steve grinned. “She’s never let me down. Uh– Then I get dressed, borrow Dad’s car, and off I go on my date.”

“Ugh,” Billy groaned, kneeing him in the back through the seat. “You’re so goddamn pure. Do you even get to third on your dates, or do you drop her off at 10pm and give her a goodnight kiss?”

“He does give off that vibe...” Robin nodded sagely.

“Shut up. Of course I do,” Steve grumbled.

“Bullshit,” Billy grinned. “You’re the kinda guy girls can’t wait to introduce to their parents.”

“As opposed to you, who girls have to sneak in through their windows lest the shame ruin their reputation,” Steve snarked.

“Pretty much,” Billy shrugged.

“Okay, *shame of Hawkins* . What do you do to prepare for a date?” Robin asked.

“Depends on the chick,” Billy shrugged.

Robin’s eyes widened.

“What do you mean, ‘it depends on the chick?” she demanded.

“I said, it depends on the chick,” Billy repeated, leaning forward, putting his elbows on either side of the front seats once again. Steve caught him wincing, but he played it off, pretending like it wasn’t hurting him.

“God, that’s so misogynistic!” Robin exclaimed, disgusted.

“No, no, no, you’re not gettin’ me,” Billy said, shaking his head.”Like... I’m a slut, right?”

Steve snorted in laughter.

“It’s true, I’m a slut, alright? I’ll fuck pretty much anyone. If the chick I’m goin’ out with is also a slut, then... Well, I’m just not gonna try as hard.”

Steve gave him an incredulous expression.

“Well— It’s not like she’s expecting’ it. I mean, she’s not tryin’ that hard either. We’re both sluts, we both agree that we’re just there to fuck and then— See ya later.”

“Okay, okay, fine,” Robin acquiesced, rolling her eyes. “Whatever. Give me your routine when you actually want to *impress* a girl, then.”

“Alright, alright... Okay. Well, first of all I take two hours to get ready.”

“Two hours!” Steve exclaimed. “What the fuck, you’re worse than a girl.”

“Shut up, lemme explain. See first, you gotta clean your car. You can look good all you want but a messy car’ll just fuck it up. She’s lookin’ around and there’s coke cans and shit everywhere... Ruins it.”

“You wouldn’t have to clean your car if you just kept it clean,” Steve said sarcastically.

Billy ignored him.

“Then you gotta shower, and shave— *everywhere* , Harrington— and pick out your clothes, usually somethin’ that shows off your ass—“

“Your ass?” Steve snorted.

“Yeah, Harrington, your ass. Chicks love lookin’ at a nice ass,” Billy said, flicking his wrist and tapping his cigarette out the window.

“Then the hair... I always do this thing with my hair where I stick a little curl over my eyes,” he said, flicking his hand in front of his face. “They go nuts for that shit... Then I put on my cologne—“

“What cologne?” Steve asked.

“ *Aramis—“*

“Aramis!” Steve snorted. “My Dad wears that...”

“So does mine, but it’s cheap and it smells good,” Billy said. “Stop interrupting. So you get out your cologne, right? You dab a little on your wrists, so when you put your arm around her she can smell it, and a little on your neck, so when she’s kissin’ you she can smell it— and then you put a little on your palms and put some down by your nuts.”

Robin burst out laughing, slamming her hands on the steering wheel. Steve recoiled in disgust.

“What the *fuck* ?”

“Down. By. Your. Nuts,” Billy smirked, enunciating each word. “Then when she’s about to give you head she gets a whiff of your cologne instead of your sweaty balls.”

Robin could barely see to drive she was laughing so hard. Beside her, Steve was simultaneously extremely disturbed and very fascinated. Billy leaned back against the middle seat and shrugged, a small smile on his face, smoking.

“You’re disgusting,” Robin wheezed, tears in her eyes.

“You are disgusting,” Steve said, snorting. “God. You in the showers at school was a fucking nightmare... Don’t pretend like I didn’t catch you blowing your nose and wiping it on the fuckin’ shower head, cause you totally did...”

Billy shrugged, a lazy smile on his face.

“Ewwww,” Robin giggled, her nose wrinkling.

“Whatever. Tommy Hagan is ten times worse than me,” Billy said. “I once caught him pissin’ in the school showers when he thought nobody was looking...”

“Ugh!” Steve exclaimed, grimacing.

“Hey, wasn’t that your old friend, *King Steve* ?” Billy asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Yeah,” Steve said, sighing, his face still contorted in disgust. “Yeah, he was...”

“You were also the King of keg stands—“

“Yeah...”

“—Which are disgusting, let’s be real, so—“

“Alright! Maybe I used to be a little gross,” Steve admitted, waving his hand. “Fine! You got me.”

“I’ve never done a keg stand,” Robin said thoughtfully. “Being a dorky band kid and all, I never get to go to parties with kegs.”

“Girls usually don’t do keg stands,” Billy said.

Robin looked at him in the rear view mirror. “What? Are you saying that girls can’t do keg stands?” she teased.

He snorted. “No, I’m just saying they usually don’t. I had a girlfriend back in L.A. who actually had my record beat. I gotta say— You country bumpkins really can’t handle your liquor, I destroyed Steve’s last year without even trying...”

“I wanna try one sometime,” Robin said. “What was your record again?”

“Forty three,” Billy said.

“Psh! I could beat that,” she said, smirking and rolling her eyes.

Billy raised his hands complacently, nodding, smiling a little.

“Sure, sure...”

“Take the next exit, Rob,” Steve instructed.

“Yeah I know,” Robin groused.

“No, that exit!”

“What?”

“ *Robin !*”

Despite a few wrong turns, they finally made it to Indianapolis. They pulled into the parking lot of the Square Centre Mall, a huge building that sprawled along the freeway and the bedroom communities that radiated from the city centre. Robin parked the car and the trio got out. Billy swung his head around, listening to the noises of the parking lot, the distant hum of the highway thrumming in the background. His first few nights in Hawkins had been almost eerie, the constant hum of traffic in L.A. replaced by a silence so complete it was almost terrifying. Cherry Oak drive wasn’t totally isolated, but even so, Hawkins was naturally darker and quieter than what he had lived with his whole life. It felt somehow comforting to hear the thrum of a city again.

He felt someone hook their arm through his, leading him along across the parking lot. Steve's voice called out beside him.

"The caffeine kick in yet?"

Ahead of them, Robin laughed.

"She's dancing," Steve chuckled.

It was around 10am and the mall was already packed with people. As soon as they walked through the doors, the sound overwhelmed him, a thousand conversations overlapping into a cacophony of noise. He turned his head toward Steve and tried to calm the flood of anxiety that swirled into his gut. He saw the Starcourt Mall, he saw the atrium... The terrified faces of the kids... That *Thing* ...

"Hey, you okay?" Steve asked him quietly, his voice in his ear.

Billy startled, swallowing.

"Yeah," he said hoarsely.

Suddenly, Robin grabbed his other arm and began to drag them through the crowds. Billy let out a tiny breath of relief as they crossed the threshold of a store, the din of the mall corridors dying down dramatically as she dragged them through the aisles, parking them at the back.

"Okay, Steve, you once asked me what kinda music I like— Here's Kate Bush's new album. I think you'll like this song..."

Billy grunted in annoyance as she took his cheek and squashed his face against Steve's.

"You too," she said, stretching the headphones out and putting the left ear over Billy's. Suddenly, the world was blessedly muffled. His face was pressed against Steve's face, cheek to cheek, his lips along his jaw. He felt the smoothness of his skin, the slight prickle of his facial hair just beginning to grow. He smelled something flowery, and the memory of the car ride fizzled back to him through the haze of unease that had settled inside of him.

Farrah Fawcett.

An aria began, and then a stilted synth melody. Kate Bush's lilting voice began to sing.

It doesn't hurt me

Do you wanna know how it feels?

Do you want to know

Know that it doesn't hurt me

Do you wanna hear about the deal I'm making?

You... It's you and me..

Billy closed his eyes. He didn't usually listen to anything like this, but the music was a distraction from the way his guts were churning.

And if I only could

I'd make a deal with God

and get him to swap our places

Be runnin' up that road, be runnin' up that hill, be runnin' up that building...

B illy jumped when Steve suddenly removed the headphones.

"That's kinda pretty," Steve said.

He could still hear Kate Bush singing from the headphones as Steve pulled them away, putting them back on the stand.

"You hate it," Robin snorted.

"No! I don't hate it!" Steve protested.

"What about you?" Robin asked him.

Billy felt disoriented, strange. In the safety of the car, with only Steve and Robin, he could relax a little... But for some reason that security had shattered the moment he had come into the mall. He felt pathetic for feeling so scared... It was just a fucking shopping mall. What guy was afraid of a goddamn mall? He was fucking pitiful. He realized he hadn't responded yet, but he felt like if he spoke he would throw up. Fury and shame welled up inside of him, and he clenched his jaw and swallowed. He forced himself to answer.

"Yeah," he said. "I like it."

A pause seemed to hang between Robin and Steve.

"Billy?" Steve asked him tentatively.

He felt like he couldn't breathe, but he forced the feeling away, feeling like he might vomit up his entire heart.

"Yeah?"

"You good?"

"Yeah," he said, forcing himself to shrug.

"Okay...," Steve said uncertainly. He was led over to another part of the store. Steve stopped and moved away for a moment. Billy felt headphones being placed on his ear, and Steve pressed himself against Billy's face again. They were ear to ear this time. Billy could feel Steve's jaw move against his. He felt like he was in a daze, processing what was going on at a delay. Steve's shoulder was turned outward, Billy's side pressed against his chest.

A jamming beat clapped into his ear. He heard Phil Collins singing, and he felt a smile growing on Steve's face, his cheek slowly lifting. Billy felt like he was frozen beside him, unable to take in the music. Then Steve *yelled* .

" *Billy! Billy dontcha lose my number! Cause you're not anywhere!* " Steve sang raucously. He grabbed Billy about the shoulders dramatically. Billy swore in surprise, jumping, startled.

" *And I can't find yooooouuu!* " Steve howled directly into his face, the

headphones twisting. Suddenly they fell off of his ears and made a suspicious cracking noise.

“Oh shit,” Steve said under his breath. Then Steve grabbed his hand, clutching tightly, and dragged him away. Billy was still disoriented, still full of anxiety... But another feeling came bubbling up beneath the anger and guilt that had overtaken him the moment he’d stepped foot into the mall. It took him a few seconds of Steve’s hurried steps and their hasty exit from Sam Goody for him to realize what it was. As Steve led him quickly away, holding on tight to his hand, Billy felt a smile crack onto his face, his entire body feeling like it had melted, his nerves sizzling and then simmering down, cooling. He snorted, unable to stop himself. Steve stopped.

“Did you...,” Billy could barely form words past his grin. “Did you break the fuckin’ headphones?”

“Totally broke those headphones, yup,” Steve said, letting out a laugh that was a little too cheeky to be a hundred percent guilty, still holding firmly onto his hand. SBilly blinked and looked down. Though he couldn’t see their hands, he could feel them. Steve’s fingers were long and thin, his palm wide. Anxiety welled in Billy’s heart once more, this time for a completely different reason. A few moments later, Robin ran up to them, the sound of a plastic bag crinkling in her hands.

“I saw you dragging Billy away while I was in line, what happened?” she asked.

“Billy broke the headphones,” Steve said, letting go of Billy’s hand, putting his arm jovially around his shoulders. “Big guy here doesn’t know his own strength.”

Robin paused.

“You totally broke those headphones, didn’t you, Steve?”

“Oh yeah.”

Billy knew he was smiling, really smiling, trying to hide it by twisting his lips. Steve slapped him on the shoulder, removing his arm.

“Well, now that we’re safely by the fountain, I’m gonna throw a quarter in and wish for mall security to never know I caused property damage…”

Billy heard Robin smacking him on the arm.

“You’re not supposed to tell us your wish, stupid! Now it won’t come true!”

“I can’t believe I’m gonna rot away in mall jail for my crimes…,” Steve sighed theatrically. Billy heard a quarter plopping into the water as Robin dug in her bag.

“Hm,” she hummed. “I wish for….”

Plunk!

“What’d you wish for?” Billy asked her.

“Not telling.”

“Here,” Steve said, pushing a quarter into his palm. “You make one too.”

Billy snorted derisively. These two were such hopeless romantics. Wishes didn’t come true— He knew that well enough. He’d wished and prayed all his life for something good, and it never came.

All the same…

He quietly made his wish and flicked the quarter into the bubbling fountain. It plonked into the surface of the water and sank to the bottom to join a hundred other wishes that he knew had been long forgotten.

“I feel like people are staring at me,” Billy said flatly. Steve looked up, Billy’s voice interrupting his internal debate as to whether he needed another pair of Adidas sneakers. His were, after all, stained with blood.

“No they’re not,” Steve assured casually, looking out across the

Kinney's and into the mall. He shrugged, looking back down at the shoes in his hand. White or red? He looked up, looking for a sales associate. A girl with a name tag was walking toward him.

"Hey, excuse me? Could I get the white in an 11?"

"Sure!" she said. He watched as her eyes flicked over at Billy, who was staring off into the middle distance, his jaw clenched. She blinked twice at him, then turned around to do her errands. Steve stood stock still in discomfort. He looked around. One guy walking with his girlfriend swivelled his head around, looking at Billy, then spinning his head away when he realized Steve had caught him looking. Steve looked up into Billy's face. He was leaning against the wall of shoes, his arms crossed.

They *were* staring.

"Here!" the girl trilled at his side, and he jumped, turning around. He tried his shoes on quietly, still reeling from the fact that Billy had been right. The girl looked up again at Billy, and then flicked her eyes away quickly. They were all just curious, but that didn't mean they weren't staring. The girl got up, walking to Billy.

"Can I help you find anything?" she asked politely, looking into his face. Billy's head did a half-turn toward her, his unfocused eyes staring.

"Uh, no. I'm good. Thanks."

The girl nodded, smiling and turned back to Steve.

"I'm gonna get these," Steve said, holding up the white pair of Adidas. She packed them in a box and he took Billy by the wrist, holding his shoes under his arm, going to stand in line.

Steve noticed it even more in the lineup. People leaving the store past the line did the same curious flick of the eye. Steve felt Billy's breath on his neck. He'd turned away from the crowd, closing his eyes. Billy was used to attention. In fact, he was sure that Billy thrived on attention. The more people were looking at him, the wider he grinned. But this was a different kind of attention. Steve paid for his

shoes, leading Billy outside of Kinney's, cozying up to the wall in the hallway, waiting for Robin to be done at Merry-Go-Round.

"They are staring," Steve said, sighing. Billy rolled his eyes.

"Whatever," Billy said.

"I mean. People used to stare at you all the time. They're still staring at you cause they think you're hot. I promise."

"Shut up, Steve," Billy grumbled.

Steve swallowed. "Okay."

He shifted his weight uncomfortably, thinking. Then, he took his Wayfarers off of his head, and put them on Billy, who jumped a little.

"Yeah, that's right, hide the weird eyes...," Billy muttered bitterly.

"God, you're so negative. Jesus. Lighten up," Steve chided. "I'm putting sunglasses on you because blind people wear sunglasses. It's like a... A social cue... *Thing* ... Whatever. Now people know you're blind."

Billy looked unconvinced.

"Billy," Steve said, sighing exasperatedly, putting an arm up on the wall and leaning in, "Come on. I'm just trying to make it easier for you... You were obviously uncomfortable with people staring."

"I don't like that I have to hide my eyes so people won't stare," Billy confessed in a rush, "it makes me feel like I'm different... Like there's somethin'... Wrong... About me."

Billy swallowed, looking down at the tile floor of the mall, his nostrils flaring. He looked uncomfortable, like he hadn't meant to say these words out loud.

"Hey," Steve said gently, leaning in. "There's nothing wrong with you. Nothing at all. Sure, you can't see right now, but... I mean, that's not something wrong, it's just... It just is. Right?"

Billy's head lifted, the neon strips built into the ceiling glinting off of his expensive dark Wayfarers, his mouth parted slightly, like he wanted to say something.

"Hey guys!" Robin called out, coming up to them.

Billy clamped his mouth shut and looked away.

At lunchtime, they wandered toward the food court. It was packed, the lunch rush in full swing.

"Whadda they got, Harrington?" Billy asked, settling down in a chair.

"Uh... Pizza, Chinese... There's an A&W...."

"A&W," Billy said, nodding. "Burger, fries, root beer?"

"You got it," Steve said, snapping his fingers and shooting two cheeky finger guns Billy's way. He went away on his errand, weaving through the crowds.

Robin looked at Billy curiously, thinking. It seemed a little rude to leave him alone, blind, in an unfamiliar city in a crowd, so she sat down across from him.. The drive up hadn't been what she had expected, though, she wasn't exactly sure what she had expected in the first place. The one and only time she had interacted with him before today had been when an eldritch horror had been controlling his body and trying to kill them all. A lot had changed since then. She bit her lip, thinking back to earlier that day, when he had seemed to become frozen in fear the moment they walked into the mall. She supposed she couldn't really blame him... He had fully died for a good minute in a mall. She felt stupid for not realizing that he might be a little nervous. She clasped her hands in front of her, looking at him. He was turning his head slightly, taking in the noise of the mall all around him.

"So," Robin began. Billy jumped a little. He must have thought he was alone. "How have you been?"

He tilted his head. "What d'you mean?"

“Well. Last time I saw you, you were busy kicking a demon’s ass, and you almost died— So I’m just wondering how you’ve been.”

Billy’s head recoiled a little from her, his eyebrows furrowing.

“My gut hurts, I got no friends, and I can’t fuckin’ see,” he said bluntly, a little angry. “So, you know— Not much worse than usual.”

Robin smiled, a little laugh escaping her. He clenched his jaw.

“Relax,” she said, leaning forward and putting her hand over his. “I’m just messing with you.”

Billy’s hand twitched beneath hers, like he was uncomfortable and wanted to pull away. She had noticed this about him in the short couple of hours that she had shared a car with him. He didn’t like to be touched. She let go of his hand, seeing that his hackles were raised.

“How’ve *you* been?” he asked her, pulling his hands away from the table and crossing his arms.

“Oh, you know— Boring school, crappy job in the evenings and weekends... The knowledge that we’re perpetually in danger from inexplicable terrors from an alternate dimension... Not much worse than usual.”

She grinned at him. He was leaning back in his chair, his eyebrows knitted together behind Steve’s wayfarers, his arms crossed, as though he were trying to stay as far away from her as possible. She was leaning forward, looking at him. After a few seconds, his arms dropped. He shook his head at her.

"You’re outta your fuckin’ mind,” he said, snorting.

“Yeah. Steve tells me that a lot,” she said, shrugging and smirking. “He’s so innocent and sweet, isn’t he? Like a little eager puppy dog... God! He used to be such a dickhead... I sat by him in a couple classes for three years and he didn’t even know who I was when we started working together.”

Billy tilted his head a little.

“What happened to him, anyway? By the time I got here, nobody really liked him,” he asked.

“Nancy Wheeler,” Robin said, quietly. “He uh... I dunno, I think he really loved her, dude.”

Billy nodded, clicking his tongue once.

“Then, the Upside Down, and all that... Yeah. He changed. For the better though. I’m glad he’s my friend,” Robin said. “He’s been there for me, in a big way.”

She looked over to the A&W. Steve was still in line. Billy put his hands on the table.

“Describe this place to me,” he said, a small smirk on his face.

Robin turned to him and grinned.

“Like, what it looks like?”

“Yeah.”

“Um. Well. We’re in the food court. It’s a sort of square arena, pretty big. There’s like ten food stores... There’s a skylight above us. The ceiling and walls are like a muted blue. They have red neon lights running through the ceiling, and above all the take out spots. We’re sitting in chairs that are like attached to the table by a bar, you know the ones? They have a wooden edge, a sort of light blue plastic top. The floor is brown tile— It’s kinda ugly, to be honest. Doesn’t go with the neon at all. They must’ve renovated but left the floor. There’s a bunch of fake palm fronds.”

Billy’s smile was very small, but very genuine.

“Tell me about the people,” he requested quietly.

“Well...,” Robin looked around, feeling oddly happy. “There’s an older couple sitting across from each other. They’re drinking coffee, quietly. They’re holding hands. There’s a group of guys sort of behind you, they’re talking. There’s a mom and her kids at another table. The baby is being fussy. There’s a dorky guy in a blue jacket waiting

at the A&W named Steve…"

Billy chuckled.

"Uh… There's a group of girls over by the Panda Express. There's four of them… One of them is blonde, the rest are brunettes. There's one girl with really cute earrings… She's got dark skin… Her top is really nice, a yellow sweater with a blue stripe… She's talking to another girl who's kinda got pale skin… She's got this red dress on…"

She blinked and looked away. She'd been staring. Billy leaned in suddenly, flicking his sunglasses onto his head.

"Steve told me," he said, his voice low. Robin felt her heart jolt.

"What?" she whispered, frozen.

"He told me… About you," Billy said under his breath, insinuating with his tone."It was by accident. He was upset as fuck when he realized. He stopped his car and threatened to murder me if I ever told anybody."

Robin felt odd, somewhere between hurt and extremely touched.

"How do you say something like that accidentally?" she demanded, quietly.

"Uh… We were fighting. He was ranting. You know he gets," Billy shrugged. "But… I promise I won't tell nobody. It's none of my business… Plus. Steve would kill me if I did. But I won't."

Robin's heart was beating very fast. She looked over to Steve. She didn't know yet if she could trust Billy, and having him know she liked girls was terrifying… But also strangely exhilarating. Now two people knew about her. It felt… Liberating.

Billy tilted his head a little. He cleared his throat.

"Tell me about the group of guys behind me," he said slowly, deliberately, his unseeing eyes staring forward. Robin gazed into his face, her eyes widening.

“What?”

“What do the guys look like?” he asked her, his voice still quiet, still deliberate, his eyebrows raised.

Robin felt her stomach flip and leaned in.

“What are you saying?” she hissed.

Billy rolled his eyes. “I’m saying... I want you to tell me about those men,” he said, putting a cigarette in his mouth, speaking around it.

“Are— Are you— What about *girls* ?” Robin hissed, her eyes popping out of her head. “All those girls you—“

“Yeah. *Both.* Whatever...” he flicked his zippo a few times, his voice a low grumble. “Don’t fucking tell anybody.”

Billy’s face was a little red as he lit his cigarette, looking extremely uncomfortable but also strangely relieved. It seemed like he had said this all on a whim, and had just realized what he’d done, the gravity of such a confession. She figured that she might have been the first person he had ever told this, from the way that he seemed to turn his head left and right, worried that someone had overheard.

Robin felt an ear-splitting grin growing on her face.

Billy was like *her* .

The feeling was incredible. She had felt alone for so long, feeling like a freak, like something was wrong with her. She knew, logically, that other people like her existed. She saw them descending en masse at protests in the news, but they were far away in places like New York, San Francisco... Hawkins was not the place where people like her existed. She felt like she could conquer the world. She felt like grabbing Billy and dancing off into the hallways of the mall. She felt like kissing him directly on the lips, spinning him around like a rag doll in sheer relief and joy. With the painstaking care of a novelist setting a scene, she described the group of college boys sitting behind Billy. He nodded.

“They sound boring. The girl with the cute earrings and nice top

seems cool, I think I'd like her. Maybe the girl with the red dress for you?"

"Yeah!" Robin exclaimed ecstatically, her voice squeaky with exhilaration, trying very hard to keep her voice quiet. Here she was with Billy Hargrove, the current Keg King, the verified Hottest Guy In Hawkins, the hurricane of MTV-fuelled masculinity that had descended on their sleepy town like a sex god, wetting panties all across the county... And she was enthusing with him about hot chicks at the mall. The situation almost defied believing, and she stopped just short of giving herself a pinch to make sure it was really happening.

"Okay... I know you've been with a lot of girls, obviously, but... What about…" Robin asked gleefully, trailing off, keeping her voice quiet, leaning in conspiratorially. She quirked her eyebrows.

He leaned his head.

"Yeah," he muttered, shrugging, taking a puff of his cigarette, blowing it to the side away from her face. "None from Hawkins, though... But I did make out with a guy named Nathan once, at a party."

"Nathan who!" she demanded.

"Uh, Fletcher, I think..."

"Fletcher!" Robin hissed, grinning triumphantly. This day just kept getting better and better. She had no idea Nathan Fletcher was also like her! "Good for him! I'm in band with him, he's kinda geeky looking... I didn't think that'd be your type..."

Billy shrugged. "He's kinda cute. I mean, he's sweet, you know?"

Robin was grinning, so wide her face hurt. She had never done hard drugs, but she felt like she'd just snorted and injected every single one.

"Who else is cute at our school?" she asked him.

"Uh. Tommy Hagan is alright. He's dumb as fuck, though, and his

voice sounds like a wet fart. Tina's fun. Kinda mean, but in a fun way…," Billy said, his voice low, tapping his cigarette in the ashtray on the table and rubbing his lip thoughtfully with his thumb. "There's this chubby guy, I don't know his name, but he's fuckin' funny as shit. His nose is kinda nice, you know? I like him... Uh, this chick named Tammy—"

"Tammy," Robin said reverently, putting her hand on her heart. "Oh my god... Right?!"

"She's fuckin'... If she doesn't end up modelling, it'll be a waste..."

"I had such a crush on Tammy...," Robin confessed under her breath. "One time she hugged me and I almost died..."

Billy chuckled. "Yeah, sometimes she swam at the pool and it was like... Titty City. Oh! Heather Holloway and I dated for a bit..."

"Fuck you, no you didn't," Robin hissed jealously, smacking him on the arm.

He grinned. "Yeah, for a bit. Nothin' serious."

"Wait, wait. Billy. I have a question for you: do you even know what I look like?" she snorted. "Like, when we were at school together, did I ever even register to you?"

"Yeah, you did," Billy said, seemingly a little offended that she thought he wouldn't. "I remember you. You always ate your lunch under that tree, out by the quad. That guy with the big glasses was with you, and a girl with brown hair and braces, and that girl with the cornrows who always wore those big sweaters."

"What!" Robin exclaimed, unable to stop herself. "Holy shit! You must have like a photographic fucking memory or something."

Billy shrugged. "I just sat in my car at lunchtime and the tree was right over there."

Robin felt like she was in a different world. If Eric, Tasha, and Darie could see her now... They'd shit. The fact that Billy Hargrove even knew them to see them would have overturned their entire

worldview. Long ago, in the ninth grade, the four of them had made a pact that they would disdain the sort of brainless activities of the popular kids, the kids who made fun of them, who made their lives miserable. Robin had fully let go of that part of her life, but the others still hurt. In a lot of ways, they always would.

“This is so weird,” she muttered, staring into Billy’s handsome face. He smirked at her.

“Who else?” he asked her.

“Carole,” she said, guiltily.

“Ugh, Carole! Really?”

“I know. I know! She’s such an asshole. What’s even more pathetic is that from grade five to grade ten she bullied me... Guess I’m a glutton for pain.”

“But she’s not even hot,” Billy snorted. “Tits like fuckin’ mosquito bites and a nose like a fuckin’ pig.”

“Oh, whatever, *Tommy Hagan!* More freckles on that guy’s face than pimples on an ass!”

“Alright, alright,” Billy said, lifting up his hands complacently. “Fine.”

“Did you think I was hot?” Robin asked him, fluttering her eyelashes jokingly.

“Not my type. Plus, I could kinda tell you liked the canoe.”

“ *Liked the canoe* ?!” Robin repeated, wheezing with laughter. Billy shrugged, snorting, running his tongue along his lips.

“Okay, what—what about Nancy Wheeler?” she asked, still snorting with laughter. “Or her ex, Jonathan?”

“No way. Not my type at all.”

“What about Steve?” she asked, curiously.

She watched in increasing interest as Billy opened and closed his mouth several times. He looked like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Hey, sorry it took so long!" Steve said, and Robin and Billy pulled away from each other quickly. Steve paused, a puzzled expression on his face, the tray of food in his hands.

"Whatcha talkin' bout?" he asked uncertainly.

"Robin said she got her period," Billy said baldly. Robin gave him a dirty look and kicked him in the shin under the table.

"Oh," Steve said, a little uncomfortably. "Uh. Okay."

He put the tray in front of Billy, coming to sit beside him.

"Yup, gonna just— Run to the bathroom and then go get food," she said, giving an unenthusiastic smile to the pair of boys. Later, when Steve had gone to the bathroom, Robin gave Billy a smack on the arm.

"What the hell, man!" she exclaimed.

Billy only leaned back, laughing.

Billy flicked open the curtains, smirking, his hands on his belt. Steve and Robin, who were leaning against the wall across from the Gap fitting room waiting, raised their eyebrows.

The pants he was wearing were black leather, and skin tight. They fit him very well. Extremely well, even. Each part of him was shown off with almost scandalous detail, the curve around the front zipper leaving almost nothing to the imagination, and the middle seam of the seat of the pants accentuating an ass that made Robin suddenly understand the girls' gawking a little better than she had before.

She looked over at Steve who was staring blankly and nodding, coming to the same conclusions she was.

"They look, uh," Steve coughed, clearing his throat. "Um. Nice."

“You look like a fucking Tom of Finland cartoon,” Robin snorted, bubbling with mirth.

Billy’s head snapped up and he grinned devilishly, putting a cigarette in his mouth and turning to the side, thrusting out his hips, his thumbs hooking into his waistband. Robin choked, Billy catching her off guard. She dissolved into a fit of cackles that echoed off of the fitting room walls. Steve looked from Billy to Robin in confusion.

“Oh my god,” Robin wheezed. She yanked her camera out of her purse, bringing it to her eye. There was a flash and a click, and Billy reached out to swat her playfully, realizing that she had taken his picture. She dodged, still cackling.

“I can’t even see the fuckin’ picture, you dick!” Billy exclaimed.

“What’s Tom of Finland?” Steve asked, his eyebrows quirking. Billy licked his lips, grinning like a shark, and Robin doubled over, wheezing.

“Don’t worry about it, pretty boy,” Billy smirked, flicking the curtains closed.

Robin and Steve exchanged grins, wearing matching fake Wayfarer sunglasses, the Eaton’s price tags still dangling from the arms. They grabbed Billy, hooking themselves into his elbows, spinning him around and parking themselves in front of a long mirror set into the concrete support beam of the department store.

“Lookin’ good, Steve,” Robin said.

“Lookin’ good, Robin,” Steve said.

“Lookin’ good, Billy,” Billy said, smirking a little.

Steve and Robin snorted with laughter, and Robin pulled out her camera. A click and a flash, and they pulled Billy away from the mirror, flinging off the sunglasses and putting them back on the display. They made their way through the men’s clothing department, the women’s clothing department, and hurried their way through the perfume department and back out into the mall.

“Ugh,” Robin said, scratching her nose with a sleeve. “God, that’s a bad smell... Reminds me of my aunt Beverly...”

“Reminds me of Steve, personally,” Billy said, looking to his left.

“Hey! What the hell, I don’t smell bad!”

“I didn’t say you smelled bad,” Billy shrugged. “All I said was that you smell like a ladies’ perfume department.”

“If this is about Farrah, I swear—“

“Oh my god, shh!” Robin exclaimed. “Look!”

Steve swivelled his head, looking to where Robin was pointing. A photo booth sat innocently along the wall opposite the Eaton’s store. She was already dragging them toward it.

“What is it?” Billy asked.

“Oh, Robin here wants to squash us into a photo booth...”

“Why? She’s got that camera...”

“Because photo booths are fun, you dinguses,” she said, rolling her eyes. She unhooked her arm from Billy, pushing him inside, as he was the widest and his lap would therefore provide ample seating room for the smaller frames of Robin and Steve. She shoved Steve in next, and he was forced to perch awkwardly on Billy’s lap, dipping his head below Billy’s chin. Robin clamoured in last, finding purchase on Billy’s other knee.

“What can I get you for Christmas, little boy?” Billy asked Steve sardonically.

“Out of this photo booth...,” Steve grumbled, snorting.

Robin hushed them and fed the machine a dollar bill.

The first flash was wholly unexpected, and Robin swore, laughing, knowing they looked totally awful. The second flash, they were more prepared. Steve opened his mouth wide, his eyebrows disappearing

into his hairline. Billy stuck out his tongue, and Robin did a few jazz hands. On the third flash, Steve cried out in disgust. Billy had managed to surreptitiously lick his finger and give Steve a wet Willy. The fourth was a blurry disaster. Robin emerged first from the photo booth, her face red with heat and her eyes rimmed in tears of laughter. Steve scampered out after her, rubbing his ear, making disgusted noises. Billy sauntered out of the booth slowly, smirking.

“God, Billy! Why?!” Steve exclaimed, gathering the cuff of his coat and digging in his ear.

“Wet Billy,” Billy shrugged, looking thoroughly pleased with himself.

Steve looked over at Billy, lounging on a bench near the entrance to the mall and smoking a cigarette. He was moving his head back and forth ever so slightly and Steve had come to know him well enough over the past month to know he was listening, picking out the different sounds all around him. His legs were splayed, one of his arms casually flung over the back of the bench beside him, where Steve sat, guarding his and Robin’s purchases as she ran back into Sam Goody’s to buy something she’d forgotten. It was now around three in the afternoon. Billy seemed lighter somehow. He’d been very guarded, and maybe even a little anxious when they had first got to the mall, but now he seemed to have relaxed a little. Even when they had their short drives on Saturdays, Steve had noticed this, the tenseness of his shoulders, the way his jaw clenched— How his body would finally start to relax before he had to take him home. He blinked and looked around at Robin, who he could see flicking through albums from his vantage point on the bench. He was quite amazed at how well Robin and Billy got along. He’d expected that they would be civil, but they seemed to have clicked right away and Steve felt almost like he was missing something, like he’d missed a few months of their friendship in the brief time he’d left to go get lunch. He wasn’t complaining, in fact, he was glad they got along. It was just kinda weird. Robin wasn’t someone he could picture Billy being friends with, and vice versa. Then again, Robin hadn’t been someone he would’ve pictured being his friend. Say what you would about the Upside Down, but it did bring people together.

“You looked like you had fun today,” Steve said, looking at Billy.

He blinked and turned his head a little.

“Yeah,” he said, agreeing cautiously, as though the realization he’d had fun had just occurred to him.

“You and Robin seem to get along,” Steve chuckled, nudging him.

Billy nodded, shrugging. “Yeah.”

“She’s fun,” Steve said. “And a really cool person. Don’t tell her I said that, though, or it’ll go to her head.”

“Secret’s safe with me, Harrington,” Billy said.

“You don’t wanna talk, do you?” Steve snorted. “And I’m just rambling in your ear, blah blah blah, askin’ you questions...”

“It’s okay, Steve,” Billy said, his voice a little quiet, looking pensive. “I don’t mind.”

Steve blinked. He thought that might have been the first time he ever said his first name.

“Okay,” Steve said, smiling for reasons he couldn’t understand. “Well, that’s good, you know, ‘cause I never shut up once you get to know me... Like, constant chatter. Nancy used to tell me to shut the fuck up, it was so bad. Blah blah blah, forever and ever...”

Billy shook his head, a small smirk on his face.

“Blah blah blah,” he agreed. “You’re so full of shit.”

Steve snorted. “Whatever man. You’re full of shit, too... You’d never shut the fuck up when we were playing basketball, like— Ever.”

“I was just tryin’ to throw you off your game,” Billy said. “And it worked.”

“Yeah, yeah... You know, I never actually understood why coach didn’t put you on the team. You were really good, better than Tommy, that’s for sure...”

Billy shrugged. “He uh... He asked me.”

Steve blinked owlishly, his eyebrows furrowing. “You said no?”

“Yeah,” Billy shrugged, crossing his arms over his chest, his jaw working.

“How come?” Steve asked. Billy let out a tiny sigh, shifting on the bench.

“Cause you were the captain,” he shrugged, mumbling.

“Wh—But you were better than me!” Steve laughed incredulously. “I mean a good player is a good player...”

“I didn’t think...,” Billy stopped and then started again, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, his head bent. “I didn’t think you’d want me.”

Steve was struck dumb, staring at Billy like he’d never seen him before.

Billy continued. “It was your world, y’know? I already fucked up your face, you didn’t need me fucking up anything else, alright?”

He lit another cigarette, his confession sounding moody and frustrated, as though Steve had forced him to reveal something embarrassing. Steve leaned forward and looked at Billy, really looked at him.

“I forgave you, you know, even before you apologized...You could have joined the team— I would’ve been happy to have you.”

Billy shrugged, looking a little sad. “Doesn’t matter now...,” he said quietly, exhaling smoke.

“I guess not...,” Steve said, one shoulder lifting uncomfortably. He felt somehow like it did matter, but he didn’t know why or how, nor how to explain that it mattered. Instead, he gently elbowed Billy.

“Listen. Don’t worry about that stuff. We’re friends now, right?”

Billy blinked and lifted his head a little, turning his face toward Steve. He had an unreadable expression on his face.

“Yeah,” he agreed softly. “Friends.”

Steve got back in the car and watched as Billy cautiously made his way into his house, half turning and waving his arm toward them. He went inside. Steve pulled away from the side of the road and went east on Steel Mill Road. Beside him, Robin was sleepily leaning back in the passenger seat, her eyes half closed, the grey sky tinged with pink in the west as the sun made its way toward the horizon.

“Today was fun,” she yawned.

“Yeah, it was pretty good, you know?”

Robin turned her head toward him, gazing at him, saying nothing.

“What?” he asked her, smiling, turning his head toward her momentarily as he turned onto the trunk road.

“Nothing,” Robin shrugged.

“Bullshit,” Steve laughed. “What is it? Tell me.”

“I dunno… I just have a lot to think about.”

“Why? Like, about Billy?”

“And you.”

“Me?” Steve snorted. “What the hell did I do that was so interesting?”

“Nothing, which is what interests me.”

“What the hell are you talkin’ about, Robin? Seriously, half the time I have no clue what the fuck you’re saying…” Steve chuckled, smacking her gently on the arm.

A few moments of silence passed.

“Have you ever thought about kissing a guy?” Robin asked him suddenly.

Steve’s eyes widened. He gave her an incredulous look. “Have I *what now* ?”

“Have you ever thought about kissing a guy?” Robin repeated, lifting her head, staring at him, a small and mysterious smile on her face.

“Uh.”

Steve was flabbergasted. He had never in his life spared a single thought to a man’s lips. In his daydreams, there was always long, luscious hair and a pair of tits attached to the body those lips belonged to. He tried to picture it now, humouring Robin. He supposed they would be soft, like any other lips, and warm... The prickle of facial hair above those lips entered his musings and his mind short circuited, pulling him out of his reverie.

“Well, I thought about it just now, and I don’t think I could do the moustache,” Steve said, flicking his eyes over to her as he slowed down to turn into her driveway. She gave him a funny look.

“I never said anything about a moustache,” she said, smiling a strange smile.

They said their goodbyes. As Steve drove away, he couldn’t help but feeling like he’d gotten the wool pulled over his eyes somehow.

5. "Zombie Dance" - The Cramps (1980)

October 29th, 1985

Steve was off in ten minutes. He kept flicking his eyes to his watch, the seconds ticking by so slowly it almost felt painful, leaning against the front counter of the deserted Family Video. It was almost five on a Tuesday night— Not exactly a happening time for people to come and rent movies. Usually Mondays and Tuesdays were a drag of old people looking to find the most depressing films they could possibly find.

“If you have time to lean you have time to clean,” Keith said sardonically, coming around the counter from the back room, holding a bag of pre-popped popcorn and munching on it. Steve held back a grimace. Keith was alright... But he was just alright. He had a strange air of superiority for someone who worked as a sales associate at two jobs and was still in high school. Steve thought at first that Keith was just a dick to him because Steve had been a dick, but it turned out that he was like that with pretty much everyone except Robin. He had his inklings about why that was, but he kept those inklings to himself. It wouldn’t matter anyways— Keith wasn’t her type. He was *so* not her type.

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve nodded, sighing, crossing his arms.

The doorbell jingled and Steve looked up, thankful for the distraction from Keith’s crunching. He froze.

Nancy Wheeler walked in, putting a lock of hair behind her ear, making her way across the threshold and wandering toward the back wall where they kept the newest releases. Beside him, Keith snickered.

“Isn’t that your old girlfriend? The one Jonathan Byers stole?”

“Shhh!” Steve hissed, his cheeks hot. He had made it a rule to try and avoid talking to Nancy ever since they had held a funeral for Barbara. It wasn’t as though he held any real animosity toward her and Jonathan, not really— It was just awkward.

“I’m not on the clock yet, guess you gotta go talk to her,” Keith shrugged, gesturing with his hand toward the shelves, smiling nastily.

Steve let out a long suffering sigh. He took a moment to adjust his hair and his Family Video vest, and walked out from behind the counter, marching boldly to where Nancy was standing, reading the back of a film case.

“*Beverly Hills Cop*,” Steve commented, coming to stand beside Nancy, putting his hands in his back pocket, “Good choice.”

Nancy jumped and turned.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, clutching the cassette cover to her chest.

“Hey,” Steve greeted, waving awkwardly.

“Hi,” she said, a small half-smile on her face. They stood next to each other in silence for several moments.

“Okay,” Steve sighed, nodding. “This has been awkward enough. I’ll go now.”

“No!” Nancy called as he started to turn around. She shook her head, her lips halfway between a grimace and a smile. “I mean... How are you, Steve?”

She looked at him earnestly, still clutching the film to her chest, just like she used to when they were in school together, always holding a binder to her torso as if it would shield her from whatever was going on. Steve turned back around and gestured somewhat grimly to the Family Video.

“Well... I’m here, so...”

Nancy nodded, looking down.

“How are—“

“Look, I’m—“

They both stopped, smiling in an embarrassed sort of way.

“You go first,” Steve said.

“I...,” Nancy began hesitantly, looking up at him from behind her eyelashes. “I just want to say I’m.. I'm sorry, for hurting your feelings last year. I didn’t mean to. I just... I don’t know.”

She laughed a little, looking down. “This isn’t much of an apology...”

“It’s... It’s fine, Nance. Really,” Steve said. A tiny part of him yelled that it wasn’t fine, but he squashed it down. He didn’t love Nancy anymore— He just missed her.

“Okay,” Nancy said, nodding, biting her lip. She looked up at Steve. “You were going to say something?”

“Oh! Just... How’re you doin’?”

Nancy pursed her lips and sighed. “Um... I’m okay. I guess. I mean... School is school.”

“Right,” Steve nodded, crossing his arms. He knew her well enough to know what she didn’t say. She was lonely. Her best friend was dead and her lover was far, far away.

“Listen, Nance, me and a couple of friends were gonna hang out on Thursday night and watch a horror movie, would that be something you’d be interested in?”

Steve clenched his teeth and felt like chopping his own tongue off. He didn’t know if he even wanted to hang around Nancy yet even though he missed her. He had such a big mouth sometimes, and it always ran a mile a minute when he was stressed, promising shit he would never have offered in his right mind. He supposed he was in it now, he may as well stick to it.

“Oh, um,” Nancy said, taken aback. “Tommy and Carole?”

Steve let out a bark of laughter.

“Oh, no! God no. Um... I’m real good friends with that Robin girl you

saw me with, y'know? At Starcourt? Robin Buckley? Yeah. Um. So she's gonna be there. And, uh..."

Steve cleared his throat. "Billy Hargrove's gonna be there too."

Nancy's eyebrows shot into her bangs. "Billy... Hargrove," she repeated, "and Robin Buckley."

"Yeah!" Steve snorted. He supposed, if you looked at the three of them from the outside, they were a pretty mismatched trio. "We were thinking of starting a club, y'know? Like – The People Fucked Over by Monsters Club, or somethin' like that…"

Steve rubbed the back of his head and cleared his throat uncomfortably. Nancy gave him an odd look.

"Whatever— Anyways," he continued hastily, "On Thursday we're gonna sit in my basement and watch *Friday the 13th.* "

"Isn't Billy... Blind now?" Nancy asked tentatively.

"Oh! Actually, yeah, but I have an idea for that!" Steve said brightly, smiling. "So, I was thinking, you know, people who can't see can only listen to movies, but if there's action with not a lot of sound, they might get confused about what's goin' on, so what I'm gonna do is describe what's going on to him while the movie plays, pausing it every once and a while to make sure he knows what's goin' on!"

Nancy blinked her eyes at him, a small smile curving slowly onto her lips.

"That's... Very thoughtful of you," she said, a small breath of laughter escaping her.

"Yeah, you know, just cause he can't see anymore doesn't mean he shouldn't get to watch movies," Steve shrugged, embarrassed, shoving his hands in his pockets. A small silence dipped between them.

"Okay," Nancy said, leaning over and giving Steve a small, teasing push on his shoulder. "That sounds interesting. I kinda wanna try it."

“You‘ll come?” Steve asked, his voice brightening.

“Yeah,” she said, nodding, giving him a soft look.

“Sweet! Alright! Um, my place at nine?”

“Okay!” she said, nodding. She put *Beverly Hills Cop* back on the shelf and walked toward the door. “See you then!” she called over her shoulder as she left.

“Dude,” Keith said, rolling his eyes and coming up beside him. “You just lost us a sale.”

“Shut up, Keith,” Steve groaned, striding to the back room to clock out.

“And you’ve still got a minute left, Harrington!”

“Shut up, Keith!”

October 31st, 1985

“We should totally go trick or treating,” Steve said. “Who cares if we’re too tall? We’ll just throw sheets over ourselves and be ghosts. Nobody’ll know!”

“I’m not goin’ trick or treating,” Billy groaned, rolling his eyes.

“Awww, come on! Maybe I’ll dress you up like a Chippendales dancer, send you to all those old ladies for a treat…”

“Chippendales?” Billy asked, confused, turning his head toward Steve. “The fuck is a Chippendale?”

Steve balked. What did Billy mean ‘what was a Chippendale’? He had to be pulling his leg.

“Oh come on man, you know,” Steve snorted. He turned off of Cherry Oak and on to Steel Mill Road, driving toward Robin’s place.

“No, Steve, I got no fuckin’ clue what a Chippendale is,” Billy

snorted.

Steve wished he had never spoken. How did Billy, who had lived a stone's throw away from Las Vegas, not know about the Chippendales?

"Dude, they're an act in Vegas! How can you not know?"

"I dunno... Tell me what they are and maybe it'll explain why I don't know!"

"They're um... Male dancers," Steve explained, flicking his wrist against the steering wheel. "You know... Like... Sexy dancers?"

Three years ago, when Steve was fifteen, his father had taken his family on a trip to Las Vegas. While cruising down the strip, Steve had seen an ad for Chippendales, bronzed, buff men in tiny panties posing manly and tough for the camera. The image had stuck with him for some reason. His mother had actually gone to a show, and a mug printed with some blonde haired, blue eyed man with a bowtie and an oiled chest was collecting dust at the back of the kitchen cupbaord along with the rest of the novelty glassware. Billy snorted, pulling out a cigarette.

"And where in the hell did you learn about them?"

"We went to Vegas a few years back... My mom has a mug," Steve said. "I mean, those shows are pretty popular, I'm kinda surprised you haven't heard of them..."

"I guess I just wasn't paying as much attention to shiny muscular guys in tiny panties as you were, Harrington," Billy snarked, grinning.

"Oh, shut up, earring boy," Steve groaned, rolling his eyes and pulling into Robin's long driveway.

"Hey, this shit is in. If you had an earring like me you'd be drownin' in pussy."

"That's gonna be the epitaph on your fuckin' grave," Steve snorted, coming to a stop at the gravel circle by the front porch of Robin's

house. "*He Died As He Lived, Drowning In Pussy.*"

"Better than what it almost was," Billy snorted. Steve's heart jumped. He hated it when Billy joked about almost sorta dying. Billy, on the other hand, thought it was *extremely* funny.

"Ugh. S'been a while, Stevie," Billy muttered, rubbing his eye. "More like a desert right now…"

Robin ran down the steps, wearing a witch's hat, and got into the backseat, lugging a heavy backpack.

"Hey!" she greeted.

"Hey," they called back. Steve turned around and drove back out onto the road.

"You could definitely still put the vibe out there, man," Steve said encouragingly.

"What're we talkin' about?" Robin asked.

"We're talkin' about how Billy hasn't got his dick wet in months," Billy snorted.

"Ah," Robin said. She shuffled to the middle seat, putting her arms on either side of the front seats.

"I mean, Carole is totally free!" Robin continued. "She broke up with Tommy Hagan, and I'm pretty sure she'd literally pay to have sex with you, so..."

"Robin, we talked about this— She ain't my type," Billy said.

"Well then, what is your type?" Steve asked, shaking his head. "See, I always thought that your type was anything that moved... Remember? Apparently you're a slut, you told us so yourself!"

"I mean, yeah, but... Carole? Ugh. I dunno, man, a girl who willingly dates Tommy H. for like two years isn't someone who I'm gonna wanna hang around with... Plus, I know she isn't trying to just fuck around."

“Okay, okay, fine. Carole is a no-go. But there’s definitely other people you could fool around with...,” Robin said, shrugging.

“Yeah, I mean, there’s tons of chicks who didn’t get their chance to screw you when you got here, I’m sure if you made a kissing booth or something they’d all line up—“

“Shut the fuck up, Steve,” Billy said, rolling his eyes, shoving him.

“What about Nat?” Robin asked, patting Billy on the shoulder.

“What about Nat?” Billy asked guardedly.

“Nat who?” Steve asked.

“Just someone in band,” Robin said nonchalantly. “I mean... Could be worth it. Nat, I mean.”

“I don’t know any Natalies in band,” Steve said thoughtfully, furrowing his brow.

“Steve, you didn’t even know my name when I sat behind you for an entire year,” Robin said flatly, flicking him on the back of the head.

“You’re right,” he acquiesced, shrugging.

“I dunno, Nat seems like... The attached kind,” Billy shrugged. “I don’t wanna hurt any feelings, as shocking as that may seem.”

“I think you’re currently hurting Carole’s feelings by not jumping her bones, to be honest,” Steve chuckled. “I don’t wanna pretend to know what’s going on in her head, but I wouldn’t be surprised if she broke up with Tommy thinking you’d date her.”

“Ugh,” Billy groaned. He had smoked almost two full cigarettes in the short interval between getting in Steve's car and picking up Robin and looked like he regretted ever speaking. “Never mind. Jesus. I’ll stick with good ol’ handy for now...”

“Which hand?” Robin asked, grinning.

“Ugh, Robin!” Steve protested, making a face. "Why would you ask

that?! You know he'll answer–"

“My right, usually,” Billy shrugged, interrupting him and lighting another cigarette.

“Your right hand?” Steve cried out, grimacing. “Awghh! That’s what hand I usually hold when I’m leading you around! Now I’m gonna be thinking about that every time...”

Robin threw her head back, cackling.

“Alright, pretty boy,” Billy demanded, turning his body toward Steve. “What hand do you use?”

Steve let out a long suffering sigh, stopping at a red light and looking down, shaking his head.

"No, I'm not telling you guys. Ugh, you're both disgusting!"

"Aw, come on! I told you, it's only fair!" Billy hollered, grinning.

"Yeah, Steve! It's only fair!" Robin agreed, grabbing Steve's head with her hand and rocking it back and forth. "Come on, spill!"

“Ugh, fine! My left,” Steve cried.

“I’m sorry, your what?”

“God, why do I tell you guys this shit? My left!”

“Right, so not only have we been holdin’ hands like we're fuckin' married or somethin,' we been holding our jack off hands,” Billy snorted, nodding, turning back around in his seat. “No wonder we’re not gettin’ any goddamn pussy...”

"Somehow I don't think that's the reason," Steve snorted, rolling his eyes and putting his foot to the gas pedal as the light turned green.

"Yeah, if anything, being around Billy all the time should've improved your game," Robin teased. "You're still technically 0-7, you know."

"Zero-seven?" Billy asked curiously, tapping his cigarette on edge of the open window.

"Oh!" Robin said gleefully, leaning forward. "Did Steve not tell you?"

"Robin!" Steve yelled, exasperated.

"See, when we are at Scoops, Steve here assured me that he could easily get girls' numbers, but I was skeptical so I made a nice tally, you know, important data. Split it between You Suck and You Rock."

"And Steve sucked," Billy deduced, chuckling flicking his tongue across his teeth.

"Sure did! Struck out *seven times* in *two hours*... I kinda wanted to count the time I told you about where he yelled his name at a group of girls as an automatic negative five points, but I didn't wanna be too harsh, you know?"

"Oof," Billy grinned. "Sorry buddy..."

He didn't sound sorry at all.

"Oh, shut up, Hargrove. Like you've never struck out," Steve said, rolling his eyes.

"Not seven times in a row," Billy snorted. "Jesus, Harrington, if I got to five I'd just give up for the day."

"He's persistent, I'll give him that," Robin smiled.

"How did I know this was gonna happen?" Steve said, shaking his head. "You know, I somehow had this feeling that if I put you two together I'd never get another moment's fucking peace. You're both total shitheads, what the hell was I thinking?"

"You can think?" Robin asked sarcastically just as Billy said "Didn't know you could do that, Steve."

Steve gestured emphatically, annoyed, turning onto his street. "What

did I say?! What did I *just say*?!"

Robin buried her head into Billy's jacket, cackling, and Billy's face split out into a shit-eating grin. Steve pulled into the driveway of his house, blowing his hair out of his face. What he was about to say was definitely not gonna make them tease him any less.

“So I, uh. I invited Nancy,” he said quickly. He winced, bracing for impact and turning off the car, pulling the keys from the ignition.

“What!” Robin cried, smacking him on the arm.

“That chick who totally broke your heart?” Billy asked, confused.

“I know, I know! I’m stupid!" Steve said defensively. "I just... She came into the Family Video, and she looked really sad and I just... I invited her without thinking...”

“God, you have got to get over this girl!” Robin said, getting out of the car and waiting for Billy. Steve got out after her, shaking his head, slamming the driver's side door.

“I am! I am over her, I just— She’s alone, alright? I mean Barb was her best friend, and now Jonathan’s gone, and we’re all friends now, you know, and we all fought the Upside Down, and it just seemed mean to not invite her...”

Billy rolled his eyes and Robin took his hand. The three of them walked to the front door and went inside the house. As usual, he had the house to himself.

“Where’s your mom and dad?” Robin asked, looking around.

“Oh, Mom’s at a Halloween social at the Glen, and Dad’s on a business trip,” Steve shrugged.

“Damn, your parents are busy as hell,” Robin snorted.

“Yeah,” Steve said, walking into the kitchen. He kept it to himself that his parents didn’t exactly get along sometimes. He thought they might really love each other, but maybe they weren’t destined to try and live the quaint suburban life together. They had married right

after high school, and had a kid two years later. Then... Life just sort of happened. He thought maybe they stayed together for security and companionship, but not much else. It wasn't a wholly loveless marriage, but it wasn't a very tender one.

"Mom thought of us, though, she left a batch of cookies," Steve said, smiling, going over to the counter and uncovering a sheet of pumpkin shaped sugar cookies. His Mom knew she didn't spend as much time at home as she should, and made up for it with baking. Steve was okay with that, though. She wasn't a mean person by any stretch, just sort of motivated by fun and excitement. Her chief concern was a good time, and anything else tended to fall by the wayside.

"Oooo," Robin cooed. "Those look yummy!"

She grabbed one and held it close to Billy's face. "Here, big guy," she said. He opened his mouth and she stuck between his teeth. He bit down on it, taking the cookie from her. Robin took another and took a big bite. Then, the doorbell rang and Robin gave him a significant look. He ignored her, running down the steps toward the front door and flinging it open. Before him stood Nancy Wheeler. He had an uncomfortable moment of déjà-vue, thinking back to two years ago when she'd shown up at his door with Barb, looking wide-eyed and dazzled by his affections. The woman that stood on his stoop now was a different woman altogether. Her eyes were tired, narrower, her body stiff and on edge. She wore darker clothing than she used to, her hair done up in a more mature style. He realized that Nancy had become an adult, in the real sense. The time she was going to spend in Hawkins was dwindling by the day.

"Hey Nancy," he greeted, giving her a small, warm smile.

"Hi," she greeted awkwardly, her hands in the pockets of her vest.

"Come in," he said, stepping aside and gesturing to the inside of the house.

She gave a small nod and gingerly stepped through the threshold. He let out a small breath he hadn't known he was holding. It was true that he didn't love her the same way he used to... But seeing her in his house again just felt really strange. All of the memories they had

shared seemed to come into the house with her, flooding his senses, leaving him feeling a little off-kilter and sad.

“We’re, uh... We’re all in the kitchen,” he said, closing the door behind her. He walked down the hall, and he could hear her steps following dutifully behind him even though she knew the way. They walked past the stairs, along the hall, and walked through the archway that led into Mrs. Harrington’s ultra modern kitchen. Robin and Billy had seated themselves at the small table in the corner of the room, the plate of cookies between them. Robin’s eyes lifted when they walked in. Steve joined them, gesturing for Nancy to come near.

“So, this is Robin Buckley, I know you guys met this summer briefly, but... I thought I’d introduce you again,” Steve said. Robin extended a hand and Nancy shook it.

"I think we had Click's class together, didn't we?" Nancy asked her, furrowing her brow. "Steve was there too, so..."

"Yeah!" Robin nodded. Steve watched them interact nervously. Robin's casual assessment of Nancy as a priss hadn't been totally inaccurate, and he hoped that they could get along. Nancy wasn't so prissy when it came down to brass tacks, and knowing Robin he knew she'd come to like that about her. He came over beside Billy and tapped him on the back.

“And, I don’t think you ever officially met Billy, other than the Halloween party at Tina’s,” Steve said. Billy turned his head toward Steve and Nancy stepped forward, gazing down at him. He wondered what she was thinking. As usual, she concealed her true thoughts effortlessly.

“Hi,” she greeted, giving him a small smile. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Me too,” Billy said, lifting a hand. Nancy shook it daintily, and Steve had a strange, sudden mental image of a grizzly bear shaking the hoof of a doe, delicacy and chaos clashing. The handshake was over in a moment, and Nancy helped herself to a cookie. She seemed a little distant, not unsure of herself but as if she wasn't welcome and was observing them from far away. She had always been a private

person, and it seemed that every time Nancy had to fight the Upside Down she lost something in its darkness.

“You got good aim, by the way,” Billy said around a cookie, gesturing in her general direction. “When the doctors got to me, I had a bullet right here.”

He touched a place near his collarbone, on the left side of his body.

“Any lower and you’d have got me, creature or no creature,” Billy smirked, leaning his arm on the back of the kitchen chair, looking arrogant and carefree. Steve knew it was an act, but he seemed to be choosing to compliment Nancy rather than hold a grudge, which he was thankful for. Billy seemed like the kind of guy who could really hold a grudge if he wanted to. Nancy had the decency to look a little embarrassed.

“Sorry about that...,” she said, grimacing, her eyebrows furrowed in sympathy.

“S’fine,” Billy shrugged, taking out his pack of Camels and sliding a cigarette out. “You were just doin’ what you had to. I’m not mad.” He paused. “Smoke?” he asked her, holding out the carton.

“Oh, no thank you,” Nancy said politely.

“You’re like Stevie, huh?” Billy smirked, flicking his zippo and lighting his smoke. “On that Scarsdale diet or some shit.”

Nancy turned around and gave him a weird look.

“I’m not on the Scarsdale diet, Billy, my parents are,” Steve said, rolling his eyes and grabbing a cookie. “And I won’t take your smokes cause they’re Camels. They’re awful.”

“Best kind,” Billy disagreed, shaking his head. Robin tapped him on the arm and he held out the cigarette for her. She took it from him, taking a few drags, before she gave it back.

“So what movie are we watching tonight anyway?” Billy asked, blowing the smoke into the air.

“*Friday the 13th*,” Robin grinned, pulling the VHS out her backpack. “You ready?” she asked Billy.

He shrugged big. Steve caught his tongue darting out over his lip, the blinking of his eyes. Steve's eyebrows raised, realizing what this meant.

Billy was *nervous*. He took a bite of the cookie. Why would he be nervous? Did... Did *they* make him nervous? Steve swallowed his sugar cookie, lost in thought as Robin and Nancy chatted politely, standing up. Robin went to move out of the kitchen and turned, giving him a look, flicking her eyes down to Billy and then back up at him. He had no idea what she meant, but there was something significant and important in her hazel eyes as she turned away, following Nancy down to the basement. Steve patted Billy on the shoulder. "You want a beer?"

"Yeah, okay," Billy said, sniffing. Steve went to the fridge and pulled out a cold can, sliding it across the table. Steve saw Billy's fingers moving across the table, looking for an ashtray that wasn't there.

"Oh– Parents don't smoke, remember? There's one in the basement, though... For me and my Mom's secret shame cigarettes she thinks nobody knows about," he snorted. He helped Billy stand, watching as his jaw clenched. The severe wounds on his chest and guts seemed to have healed, but the internal parts of him were still really sensitive, still on the mend. Billy grabbed the beer with his hand holding the cigarette, letting Steve lead him out of the kitchen.

"I can move on my own," Billy grumbled, more to himself than to Steve, like he were trying to convince himself this was the case.

"I know you can," Steve chuckled. "Trust me, I know. You're just not used to this house, so... Don't want you falling down the stairs, you know?"

Billy was quiet. He looked away.

“Well, they’re fucking now,” Steve laughed, leaning forward and tapping a cigarette into the ashtray on the coffee table.

“Really?” Billy said sardonically over the moaning and gasps coming from the TV speakers. “Are they fucking?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, casually, passing Billy the smoke. “You know, sex? That thing adults do with their bodies when they find each other hot?”

“Oh wow,” Billy said, putting the smoke in his mouth. “I’ve never heard of that, please tell me more...”

Steve, Nancy, Robin, and Billy were seated side by side on the outdated basement sofa, Billy sitting in the middle, Steve pressed up to his right, Robin curled onto the couch on his left, and Nancy leaning against the arm beside Steve.

“Oh shit!” Steve exclaimed, swatting Billy’s arm with the back of his hand. “Buddy’s dead on the top bunk with his throat slashed! Grody.”

“Ewww,” Nancy complained.

“I can’t believe none of you have seen *Friday the 13th* ,” Robin said, as the other camp councillors on the screen started to play strip monopoly. “Like, how?”

“I don’t like horror movies... All the blood and guts are gross,” said Nancy.

“Nancy, you’ve seen real blood and guts,” Steve pointed out.

“Yeah, so I’m not about to look for it when I don’t have to!”

“Oh— They’re panning back to the couple, they’re both naked,” Steve said. “The guy has his hand really strategically placed over his girlfriend’s tits.”

“Wow, Steve, you’re really good at describing ladies tits… I got other movies with tits at home you could describe for me sometime if you’d

like...” Billy grinned.

“Ugh,” Nancy said. “Gross, Billy!”

“I’m not describing pornos to you,” Steve said flatly, snorting.

“I’ll describe them to you sometime, Billy,” Robin sighed dramatically, leaning her head on his shoulder.

“Yeah, Robin’s not a prude like you two,” Billy said, elbowing Steve.

“Prude! Come on...”

“The guy’s lighting a joint in bed,” Robin continued, picking up describing the movie where Steve left off. “He thinks he hears something—“

The music went shrill, a cacophony.

“An arrow from underneath the bed into the neck!” Robin shouted enthusiastically, sitting up straight. “Blood everywhere!”

Nancy and Steve made noises of disgust.

“You guys are babies,” Robin sniffed.

For the next while, Billy let himself sink into the overstuffed couch, his arms crossed, getting a jumbled but mostly accurate rendition of *Friday the 13th*. His body felt very tense and very relaxed at the same time, feeling like he wanted to sink into the couch cushions and disappear. He tried to play it off, ignore the feeling, but it felt like something heavy was pressing into him, like he was being suffocated. His mind wandered as Steve and Robin chattered away in his ears.

He’d officially been in Hawkins for a year.

In his mind, there was a great divide between who he’d been and who he was still trying to be, a dark schism of fear and confusion slicing him in two. The year he had spent in Hawkins felt like a lifetime, a nightmare. He wondered how Steve and Nancy could still bear to be here, knowing what they knew, experiencing what they had experienced... He had the uncomfortable realization, once again,

a full year later, that he was a coward. He was stuck in this town by circumstance and what he had endured, but if he had been Steve? He would've driven away long ago and never came back. He wondered what kept Steve here, what kept him tethered... Was it Nancy? Was it Robin? Was it... Him? He couldn't fathom it.

"Oh shit! The kid!" Steve yelled. "The kid is still there! Fuck!"

Billy jumped, Steve knocking into him as he threw himself back onto the cushions. Robin cackled.

"Did that actually scare you?" she demanded, wheezing.

"No," Steve said, slowly sitting back up. "Just startled me."

"Wow," Nancy said, snorting. "For your information, Billy, a swamp monster kid grabbed Alice and pulled her into the lake."

"Jason Voorhees lives," Billy said in a low, creepy voice, "Lying in wait... Ready to drown another Steve..."

He took a hand and grabbed Steve's shirt, growling like a monster.

"Very funny, shithead...," Steve snorted, shoving him off.

"So— How'd you like the movie, Billy?" Robin asked.

"I think that I got a fuckin' headache from all of you tryin' to talk to me at once," he replied, crossing his arms. "I think maybe a movie with more talking would probably work a little better..."

"But you didn't hate it?" Steve asked. Billy blinked. He sounded hopeful.

Steve really wanted him to be able to watch movies with them. He wanted to include him. Steve wanted him around.

He was so touched he forgot to lie.

"Yeah," Billy said. "It was... Fun."

November 2nd, 1985

Billy got in the passenger seat of Steve's car, the leather seats squeaking as he sat down. He shut the door, shivering a little. November had blown in a blast of frigid air from the north, and brought along with it a cold frost. He noted that Steve had the heat blasting inside the car, and was quietly grateful.

"So— Where d'you wanna go?" Steve asked him, yawning.

"Doesn't matter," Billy shrugged.

They had fallen into a routine, one that Billy could never admit was the highlight of his endless weeks, breaking up the monotony of the small chores he had figured out how to do and the constant tense stares from his father that he felt tingling down his spine. It seemed like Steve was showing up more and more as the weeks went on. At first it had almost seemed like he'd been avoiding him, a two week gap in between the first two Saturday drives they'd taken… And then he'd showed up again, apologizing for having to work, and picking up their awkward half-friendship like nothing had happened. Billy wasn't proud of the fact that in the weeks where Steve had called to tell him he couldn't come, he'd been more than a little disappointed. He knew it was dangerous to feel like that, to have that disappointment when Steve couldn't come around... It meant that he *wanted* him to come around. And wanting... Well. Wanting was dangerous.

He listened as Steve fiddled with the radio, flicking through stations and finally landing on something soft. He turned the volume down to a low hum.

"This is our fifth drive together," Steve said with a laugh. "Can you believe it?"

"You been keeping count?" he snorted. He brought his thumb up to his lip, feeling something in him crumble. If he was keeping count, maybe Steve was just doing this because he felt he should.

"Actually, Robin told me at work yesterday," said Steve. "Why she's keeping count is anyone's guess..."

Billy blinked and shrugged, but he had a feeling he knew. He lit a cigarette, giving himself something to do with his hands. Steve started the engine of the car, shifting into drive.

“You can smoke, but could you crack the window? Sorry, my Dad’s rules...”

Billy grunted and crawled a hand down the side of the door, finding the lever and spinning it.

“Your Dad’s got tons of cars, how come he’s so anal about this one?” Billy grumbled.

Steve snorted derisively. “I dunno. Guess you don’t own a big company without being a little bit anal. Still— I don’t wanna piss him off. This is the only car I’m allowed to drive. I tried to buy it off of him recently but he wouldn’t give me a deal...”

“What a dick,” Billy said around his smoke.

“Yeah... He isn’t always a dick, but... He’s been kind of a dick lately... I dunno. I think it’s ‘cause I didn’t get into college. I guess that’s a crime in his book or something....”

Billy clicked his tongue. “Max’s gonna be the only one in my family who’ll go to college, if she even goes,” he shrugged. “I mean— It’s definitely not gonna be me.”

“I guess it isn’t gonna be me, either...” Steve sighed. A little silence lapsed between them.

“It’s like... It’s like he’s punishing me for trying to go and then not getting in,” Steve said, his voice edged in quiet frustration. “He offered me a job, you know, before I graduated. Would’ve made a decent paycheque, benefits, insurance... Coulda had that right out of high school. But I said no, ‘cause I wanted to go to college with Nancy... But then I didn’t get in. And now it’s like he’s punishing me for failing at college and for not taking the job with him...” Steve sighed. “I dunno. Whatever.”

Billy smoked in silence. Steve’s problems were of the kind that he assumed most people dealt with, tension between parents who

wanted their kids to achieve and kids who underachieved or achieved different things than what they wanted. He assumed from the way Steve was talking that Mr. Harrington had once been proud of his son, but was now experiencing a little difficulty in finding pride in anything he was doing. Billy shifted in his seat. He couldn't really understand it. Sure— His Dad beat him and called him names, but his Dad was a trashy piece of shit raising him, another trashy piece of shit. Steve was nice, pretty, and smart... And it wasn't like Steve was sitting around being lazy. He was working hard. But, Billy supposed, it wasn't the kind of work Steve's parents felt was worthy of their son. The entire superior attitude of Steve's parents pissed Billy off. They had a perfectly good kid who worked hard and only mildly complained. Steve was a good person— far, far better than him, that was for sure— couldn't they be proud of that?

"Anyways... Sorry," Steve sighed. "Didn't mean to just dump that shit on you. It's just been pissin' me off lately. I feel like nothing I do makes them happy, y'know?"

Billy snorted. "Listen. If they ain't happy with you, then there's no hope for the rest of us. Parents are just selfish, and that's the truth."

Steve let out a little laugh, the signal light clicking as he turned right.

"Yeah," he said. "It's like... Sometimes I wonder if half the people who have kids even wanted to have kids, you know? Or if it was just something they did cause they were bored, and now they're pissed that it's real work."

"Tch. Yeah," Billy agreed, turning his head to Steve, a small ironic smirk on his face. Steve didn't know the half of it.

A comfortable lull settled between them as Steve drove. Billy threw his cigarette out the window and then cranked it shut. He lay his head back on the headrest and thought about nothing in particular, letting his mind wander. His mind drifted to L.A., the people he'd left behind, the places he used to go to. After a while, Steve spoke up again.

"Billy?"

“Mhm?”

“My Dad has a Shelby Cobra,” Steve said, his voice oddly conspiratorial. Billy immediately sat up to attention, intrigued. “And... My Dad isn’t at the dealership today...”

“Uh-huuuh...,” Billy prompted.

“And that’s the garage where he keeps his Cobra...”

“Right...” Billy said, a grin slowly growing on his face.

“The guy who manages on Saturdays is named Derek, soft guy, real nice... Has a tender spot for me...”

Billy could see where Steve was going with this.

“And it’s always been my dream of drivin’ a Cobra, but ever since the accident....,” Billy supplied, giving Steve his best sad baby blues and blinking his long eyelashes.

Steve cackled devilishly.

“You ready?” Steve asked. He was so excited he felt like he might vibrate right out of the cab of the car.

“Fuck yeah,” Billy grinned at him.

Steve floored it.

The Cobra’s engines purred loudly to life, shooting down the highway like a rocket, blasting leaves off of the tarmac and passing telephone poles so quickly they blurred together like dots. Steve was gunning for one of the only big hills in the road for miles. They curved down into the gulley, the wind whipping their hair. Steve pushed the pedal to the floor and they shot up over the ridge.

Beside him, Billy yelled in unbridled joy and Steve felt his ass lift out of his seat as the Cobra sailed up over the ridge, his gut flipping. As they slammed back down onto the road, he flung a hand out, finding Billy's and grasping it tightly, lifting their entwined fists to the sky.

"*Wooooohooooooooo!*"

"I swear we got air," Steve said excitedly.

Billy walked slowly with Steve up the front steps of his house. They were both still buzzing with adrenaline.

"Dude, we definitely got air," Billy said, punching him on the arm. "My ass definitely left my seat for a second there…"

"That was so awesome!" Steve crowed. They stopped in front of the porch. Billy moved to the left and grunted, putting his hand on his chest and rubbing the skin underneath his shirt, wincing. "Definitely pulled my guts a little though…" Billy muttered.

"Oops," Steve said sympathically. "Sorry about that…"

Billy shrugged and reached behind him, finding the support beam for the porch. He leaned on it. His wounds were mostly healed now, but they were very, very tender and easy to tear. He'd definitely torn something, but… God, it'd been worth it. He looked up and crossed his arms over his chest, a grin trying to break out across his face.

"Whatever, man. It was fuckin' awesome," he snorted. "How pissed is your Dad gonna be?"

"Well, hopefully not at all if Derek keeps his word...," Steve chuckled.

They stood together on the step. Billy was still fighting a grin, a gleeful, mischievous one that had put itself on his lips the moment they'd sat down in the Cobra and had been trying to take its place on his face ever since. He hadn't had the urge to smile this long since... Well. He couldn't really remember. Steve, he noticed, seemed to have that effect on people.

"Well— G'night," he promted, shoving a hand in his pocket, the other reaching for the door. He couldn't stand out here too long with his Dad so nearby. He didn't like Steve to begin with and hanging around chatting at the front door was just begging for him to start shit.

“Yeah— Alright. See you next Saturday?”

“Yeah. See you,” Billy nodded, an amused smile finally putting itself on his lips. He heard Steve turn around and walk down the step. He went inside. He could hear the TV going in the sitting room and trailed his hand along the wall, walking softly. He hoped his Dad was asleep. He didn’t really want to talk to him.

He almost made it to his room when his Dad spoke up.

“So. What did you and Steve do today?”

Billy stopped.

“Just went for a drive. Usual,” Billy shrugged, facing away from the sound of his father’s voice.

Neil grunted softly. It seemed like he didn’t have the energy to heckle him any further. Billy opened his bedroom door and went inside, letting out a breath of relief. Any time he could avoid talking with his dad was a bonus for him.

The phone rang.

Billy jumped a little, taking off his jean jacket and throwing it onto his bed, stretching.

“Billy, for fuck’s sake, get the goddamn phone!” his father bellowed at him through the door from his place in the living room.

Billy rolled his eyes. “Alright!” he bellowed back. He stalked over to the noise of the ringing on his bedside table, annoyed. It was probably Lucas calling trying to make up with Max for the fiftieth fucking time... As far as he knew, she wasn’t even home. He picked it up.

“Hullo?”

“He-hello?” said a strangely familiar voice. “Is this... Is this Billy Hargrove?”

Billy furrowed his brow.

“Yeah,” Billy said, cautiously, reaching out with his free hand to find the edge of the bed, sitting down on it. “Who’s this?”

“It’s... It’s Harley.”

Billy froze.

“I— I called a couple times. Sorry about that... Every time your Dad answered, I just hung up...”

Billy’s throat felt like it had closed over. He licked his lips and swallowed, trying to force his voice through his throat.

“Are—are you still there?”

“Yeah,” he croaked hoarsely.

“I just.... I heard what happened... The accident... I just wanted to know if... If you’re okay,” Harley explained haltingly.

“I— I’m blind now,” he said baldly, his mind short-circuiting. Why was Harley calling him? They hadn’t spoken to each other in... A very long time.

And for good reason.

“Blind...,” Harley whispered. There was a long pause.

“Are you... I... Jesus Christ, Billy...”

“I— I miss you, Harley,” Billy heard himself say, quietly, so that his father wouldn’t hear. He sounded so pathetic that he winced. Once, he and Harley had been inseparable. They had told one another everything. Those days were long gone, but the unexpected sound of Harley’s voice sliced through the thick skin around his heart like a knife.

“I... I miss you too, Billy,” Harley said quietly. They said nothing for a few moments.

“Listen. I have a week off of school coming up, around Thanksgiving,” Harley said suddenly, in a rush. “Would you want to

see me if I drove up to Indiana?"

"Yes," Billy breathed, his heart hammering wildly in his chest. "Yes," he repeated, louder, "... Please."

"Okay," Harley said, swallowing loudly. "Alright. I'll— I'll give you my number— but, I guess you can't really write it down?"

"I'll remember," Billy promised.

"Okay," Harley said with a small, hysteric laugh.

Billy tattooed the number Harley gave him on his heart.

"I'll call you when I leave L.A."

"Okay," Billy said, a tiny flare of joy and fear burning inside. "And... Harley?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks," Billy whispered.

6. "All Touch" – Rough Trade (1981)

November 22nd, 1985

In the distance, Robin heard a loud engine revving, music blasting through the brisk November air. As the sound came closer, she recognized Patti Smith's voice screaming across the busy parking lots of Church Street Plaza, echoing off of the Denny's, the Walgreens, and the K-Mart.

" *TOTAL ABANDON, TOTAL ABANDON, TOTAL ABANDON —*"

A beat up, rusted Ford Econoline van came screeching into the parking lot where they were waiting, the music howling through the open front windows and startling a crowd of moms on their way to do some Christmas shopping. Robin watched as the van screeched toward them. She turned her head to where Billy was leaning against his Camaro, and watched as his expression suddenly brightened. He lifted his head at the sound of the junky old van and loud music and a smile split out across his face. The Econoline seemed to slow down for a moment, as though its driver was looking for something, but then set off again like a bat out of hell directly toward them. The driver of the van pulled crookedly into the spot beside them, and the growling, rattling engine cut out suddenly, the music cutting out along with it. Robin only got a moment to try and get a good look at this guy who'd driven all this way to see Billy before the door opened and a blur of black leather, leopard print, and a flash of bright red came flying out of the driver's seat. Robin was left blinking at the van's open door.

She turned her head to Billy and saw that someone short with bright red hair was burying themselves into Billy's blue denim coat. Robin blinked again and small bits of information made it slowly into her brain. First, Harley was a lot smaller than she was expecting. Second, Harley was wearing a worn leather jacket covered in patches and a leopard print mini skirt, and thirdly...

Harley was a *girl* .

Robin blinked, her brain short firing.

Harley pulled herself out of Billy's embrace and held his shoulders, gazing into his eyes. He looked down at her, his eyes unfocused, and she made a small sound that could have been a sob before wrapping her arms around him even tighter than before.

"Oh, Billy Boy," she sniffed, her voice constricted with emotion. "What happened?"

Billy's jaw twitched and he blinked, his eyebrows furrowing.

"It's a... Long story, Harley," he said quietly into her crimson hair. Harley's face was turned to Robin this time, her dark and dramatic eyeliner smudged against her dark brown skin. Her lips were decorated in a black lipstick, and a section of her tight red curls was shaved just above and behind her right ear, where safety pins and a razor blade hung. Harley finally let Billy go. Beside Robin, Steve had come over and was standing beside her with his arms crossed, a small smile on his face and his eyes soft. Nancy was a little more hesitant, leaning against the Camaro from the other side, and watching the exchange with interest. Billy put his hands on Harley's shoulders, a small but genuine smile on his lips.

"Ugh," he muttered. "You still smell like menthols."

Harley had tears in her eyes, her mascara running a little. She snorted and smacked him on the arm.

"And you still smell like a Calvin Klein ad for douchebag panties," she sniffed, grinning happily at him, wiping her cheek with a fingerless glove. He let out a breath of laughter.

"I'd say it's good to see you, but, well..."

"Christ, Billy...," she muttered, her face falling, taking his chin in her hand and stroking his cheek with a finger covered with peeling black nail posh.

"Yup," he said dully as she stared into his pale eyes. "But... Here. Let's talk about that later," he said, obviously fighting through a strong emotion, his voice lilting a little with the effort.

"Yeah... Yeah, of course!" Harley said, smiling, sounding like she had

a bad cold. She let her hand fall to her side and turned to Robin.

Robin wasn't prepared to suddenly be spoken to and stared at Harley with wide eyes, an overly bright and lopsided grin bursting onto her face. Her brain was running a mile a minute but the only sentient thought it was capable of generating were the words *'Oh shit, oh fuck, oh shit, oh fuck* ' on repeat.

"I'm Harley!" she said brightly, introducing herself and holding out a gloved hand. Robin nodded vigorously and shook her hand, grinning.

"And... You are?" Harley prompted after a few moments.

"Oh!" Robin winced. "Oh, I'm Robin, Buckley. Robin Buckley is my name. Haha!"

Steve gave her a sidelong look of confusion. Robin clamped her mouth shut in embarrassment. Harley let their hands fall and nodded, smiling, turning to Steve, who immediately offered his hand.

"I'm Steve Harrington," he said calmly, and Harley grinned.

"Oh, yeah! Harrington!" she exclaimed, turning her head to Billy. "You told me about him!"

Robin's head snapped up from where it had been hanging in shame and embarrassment and looked at Billy, who seemed to suddenly have a desperate desire for a cigarette, a small pink flush on his cheeks. Robin raised an eyebrow.

Harley turned back around to Steve. "He taught ya to drive stick!"

Steve snorted. "Yeah, he did. I was really, really bad at it. I mean... It was like..."

Steve made an exaggerated movement, pretending to shift gears. He made a pained face. "SCREEEeeeee!"

Harley laughed, swatting him on the arm. Nancy had crept forward, standing a little behind Steve. Harley's eyes alighted on her and she smiled.

“I’m Nancy Wheeler,” Nancy said politely, offering her hand and her thin wrist where her shiny Seiko watch was sitting on a shiny brown leather strap.

“Hey, Nancy,” Harley greeted, and Robin did not miss the way that her eyes looked over Nancy’s eyes, nice hair, and pretty white dress. Harley stepped back and looked over to Billy, who was smoking a cigarette and resolutely keeping his head turned away from where he had heard Robin’s voice. She went over and patted Billy on the shoulder, seeming to try and hold back before giving him another aggressive bear hug.

“God, I can’t believe you’re alright!” she exclaimed. “Aaghhhh! My bouncing Billy Boy!”

She rocked him from side to side. Steve stopped forward.

“Hey, we totally get it if you guys wanna be alone for a while, you know?” he offered kindly, giving Harley a warm smile.

Harley pulled away from Billy and shook her head, her hand reaching toward them.

“Oh my god, no! No no no! You guys have been... You’ve been takin’ care of him, right? You’re his friends,” she said, grinning, sniffing away tears, shaking Billy’s shoulder reassuringly. Robin tuned out the conversation that passed, where she was vaguely aware that they had agreed to go to the Denny’s. Suddenly they were moving off and Robin had to run to catch up.

Robin sat in the booth beside Billy. Harley sat across from them, Steve and Nancy on either side of her and laughing loudly at a joke she’d cracked. She was extremely funny, and even managed to elicit a hearty, genuine laugh from Billy more than a few times as they ate their meal. She told stories about the punk shows she’d been to, the life stories of the kids she and Billy had known back in L.A., what had been going on, and anything else that came to her head. She chattered on pleasantly, and Billy seemed to be absorbing everything she said with the thirst of a man parched for water. Robin, too, hung

onto her every word. Despite the aggressive tone of her clothes, she was a warm and cheerful sort of person who seemed to find enjoyment in almost everything.

“What happened to Cynthia King?” Billy asked quietly, after the waitress had come and cleared their plates. Robin watched as Harley bit her lip before answering.

“She, um... She’s okay,” she said lamely, a bit of her usual cheeriness leaving her tone. “She um... Well, after you left she kinda... Started dating Brian Sherman.”

Billy froze and clenched his jaw. “Great,” he said dully, tapping his cigarette into the ashtray.

“Sorry man,” she said quietly.

“Whatever,” Billy sighed. “It’s done. And... They never called me anyway, once I moved. None of em’ did.”

Robin watched as Steve’s eyebrows dipped a little, watching Billy’s face. He moved a little closer to Billy, like he wanted to comfort him. Robin’s heart leapt out of her chest, the combination of this subtle display of softness from Steve and her own feelings going haywire in her chest almost too much for her to bear.

“So, uh, how long have you guys known each other?” Steve asked Harley, changing the subject. Robin let out a quiet breath.Harley snorted, leaning back against the booth and slinging an arm around Billy’s shoulders. A ghost of a smile appeared on Billy’s lips.

“We used to date,” Billy said, his mouth quirking. Harley laughed, smacking the table.

“Dated!” she exclaimed, giggling. “Come on, Billy.” She shook her head, still grinning, and explained.

“We grew up together. Same kindergarten, same elementary, same middle school, high school. We used to hang all the time... And yeah,” she said, rolling her eyes, a little smile on her face. “We did date... Only we were six years old and it lasted for like one fuckin’ recess.”

Robin let out a cackle of strange, relieved laughter. When she felt the confused looks of Steve and Nancy, she stopped, clamping her mouth shut. Was this the friend Steve had told her about, the one who was gay? Her heart hammered in her chest. If she was…
“So, you been friends ever since, huh?” Steve commented, nodding. “Cool!”

Billy sighed and leaned back, puffing out a cloud of smoke. “Well, not always friends. After a while I kinda... uh...”

“Became a dickhead?” Harley prompted, smiling, though her tone was without malice.

“Yeah,” he agreed, nodding. “That.”

They split the bill and as they finished their coffees, Billy asked where Harley was staying.

“Oh, just in the van,” she shrugged. “It’s fine. It’s a little chilly but I got a bunch of blankets, I should be good.”

Robin’s brain suddenly felt like it was being hit by an electric shock.

“You can stay in my basement,” she offered loudly, suddenly.

She felt all eyes turn toward her. Only Billy’s face stayed turned away and she saw him fighting a smirk. Harley blinked in surprise.

“Oh! I mean— Would that be cool?”

“Oh yeah,” Robin said, shrugging, desperately trying to be cool. “I live with my Mom and she won’t mind. It’s super cold this time of year, you’d freeze in the van.”

Harley nodded, smiling at her with that confident and twinkling smile she had, and Robin felt like dying.

“Alright, I mean, if that’ll be okay with your Mom, I won’t say no!”

“You guys wanna do something today?” Steve offered, looking around. “Maybe drive around or something? We’ll show you the sad few square miles that is Hawkins and then maybe catch a movie?”

“Yeah, that sounds good!”

“Whose turn is it to be storyteller?” Nancy asked, smiling a little, looking around.

“Uh, Harrington,” Billy said quickly.

“Oh,” Steve said, his brows furrowed. “I thought it was Robin’s turn?”

“Storyteller?” Harley asked.

“Oh, since Billy can’t see what’s on screen we take turns describing it,” Nancy explained.

“Oh, right on!” she said. “I could probably do that for you!”

“I think it’s fine if Steve does it,” Billy insisted, trying very hard to be nonchalant, and, at least to Robin’s eyes, failing miserably. “No offence, I just like the way Steve describes shit.”

Across from him, Steve looked mystified but shrugged mildly. “Yeah man, I don’t mind at all. I can do it.”

“Alright, well— Let’s get going, then!” Harley said enthusiastically.

They left the Denny’s in a flurry of coats and chatter, setting out across the parking lot. Robin grabbed Billy’s arm, offering to lead him, and hung back a little from where Steve, Nancy, and Harley were walking toward the cars, chatting.

Billy turned to Robin before she could even get a word in.

“Oh Harley,” he mocked quietly in a high pitched voice, fluttering his eyelashes. “You can stay in my basement if you want... *Wink.* ”

“Oh yeah, like you’re one to talk,” she hissed. She imitated Billy, pretending to smoke with her free hand.

“Hey, uh, Steve... You wanna take me to the movies?” she mocked in a deep exaggerated voice. “I just like the way you describe shit...”

Billy pursued his lips and elbowed Robin in the side. “Shut up,” he growled.

Robin snorted, tugging him to catch up to their friends. “Come on, lover boy…”

“Alright,” said Andy. “What’s your home life like?”

“Oh, my home life?” Bender said, pointing to himself.

“Yeah,” Andy challenged.

"Oh, it’s real easy,” Bender said, standing back up again.

He pretended to be drunk, pointing.

“Stupid… Worthless… No-good goddamn freeloadin’ son of a bitch,” he imitated in a deep voice. “Retarded, big-mouth, know-it-all, asshole jerk.”

He changed, his voice going higher pitched.

"You forgot ugly, lazy, and disrespectful.”

The deep voiced drunk was back in an instant.

“Shut up, bitch!” Bender shouted, smacking the air behind him. “Go fix me a turkey pot pie.”

“What about you, dad?” Bender asked.

“Fuck you,” he said, imitating his father.

“No, dad. What about you?”

“Fuck you!” he shouted, becoming his own father’s fury.

“NO, DAD, WHAT ABOUT YOU?”

“FUCK YOU!”

Bender punched the air. A shattering sound echoed.

"Is that for real?" Brian asked.

Bender turned to him.

"You wanna come over sometime?"

"That's bullshit. It's all part of your image. I don't believe a word of it," Andy mocked from the front of the library.

Bender looked at him in a crazed fury.

"You don't believe me?"

"No."

"No?"

"Did I stutter?" Andy sneered.

Andy the Jock didn't believe John Bender. He thought he was making it up. Billy took a deep breath.

Bender slowly advanced on Andy, his eyes wide. He leaned down, pulling up his sleeve. On his forearm was a small circular scar.

"You believe this? Huh?" Bender goaded. Clair looked over, saw it, and looked away. Andy can barely look at it.

"He's showing them a burn scar on his arm," Steve whispered in his ear.

Billy closed his eyes and swallowed.

"It's about the size of a cigar," Bender sneered, shoving it in Andy's face, who was resolutely looking away. "Do I stutter?"

"See, this is what you get in my house when you spill paint in the garage..."

He stepped back, pulling his sleeve down. He walked backwards, his voice constricted with emotion.

"I don't think that I need to sit with you fucking dildos anymore."

He walked over to a stack of atlases on a table. Suddenly he shouted in fury, knocking them off the table. He climbed up onto the stairs, sitting on them, facing away from the group, breathing heavily.

Nobody believed Bender. Only the scar on his arm made them believe it. Billy felt his guts roiling and the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end when Bender cried out in anguish. Billy felt every word that was said, as though John Bender was talking directly at him through the projection screen. When he had been a kid, his Mom used to play an album with a song on it that described a lady feeling like a stranger saw right through her. He knew how she felt. He leaned on the side of the seat, his chin on his hand, his ear close to Steve. He didn't take in the movie, or even Steve's whispers. He was thinking about his father. Some time later, he heard laughter and a loud tune playing across the loudspeaker.

Steve managed to describe what was going on to him through fits of laughter.

"Clair hid Bender under the table... He put his head between her legs," he snorted.

Billy forced a small smile on his face. He hadn't really been paying attention.

Steve went on describing the film. In reality, Steve was a little blunt when it came to film descriptions— Robin had the real talent. She had a way with words that made him understand what was going on the screen as if his eyesight was returned. Nancy tended to notice all the details, like a detective. Steve just gave him the overview, the most efficient way to get the gist of what was going on. He thought about why he had insisted on having Steve be the one to describe the movie to him. Harley had offered, and it would have been nice to hear her chatting amicably in his ear. He blinked and clenched his jaw. He saw the dark uncertain maw of his feelings opening up near his feet. He wanted to turn away, look away, but he knew too much about himself to pretend. He saw the inklings of a fire beginning to burn that he was powerless to stop.

He *liked* listening to Steve.

Steve's heart was stitched right into the cuff of his expensive jackets for all to see. Billy knew he'd been narrow and petty once, but had been humbled. He'd seen him leaving Tina's party the year before, crying, trying to hide it, after Nancy had hurt him. He'd really loved her, enough to become better than he used to be. He had a big enough heart to care for a squad of dorky teens, to open his arms wide to accept Robin for who she was, to forgive Nancy... And to forgive him, too.

"Come on, lover boy..."

Lover boy? His cheeks flushed, his jaw clenching. Robin was wrong. She had to be wrong. It was all fun and games to pick out hotties at the mall... Getting to know them was a whole different ball game. Quietly, sadly, Billy closed the door on his heart, stopping the tide of the feelings that threatened to rush out. The way his thoughts were going only held hurt. Steve's popcorn breath exhaled onto the side of his face as he laughed. The Bender character was muttering to himself. Then, there was a loud crash.

"He just fell through the ceiling tiles," Steve giggled, crunching on popcorn.

Billy snorted, smirking, grateful for the distraction.

"I did that once," he whispered back. "Crawl on ceiling tiles. Fell through onto a desk."

"Really?" Steve laughed around his popcorn.

"Yeah. Was trying to skip class. Fell right into a classroom. Stood up and smiled at the teacher, saluted her, and left."

Steve snorted, elbowing him. "That's awesome."

"Will you two *shut the fuck up* ?"

A guy sitting in front of them had clearly had enough of the whispering. Billy's jaw clenched. He supposed it was fair of him to ask them to shut up, but it burned his ass. He deserved to know what was going on in the movie. He clenched his fists, wanting desperately to knock the lights out of this dillweed but hesitant to do so. He

wasn't used to moving around without being able to see, and he didn't really feel like accidentally whaling on some innocent bystander. He kept his mouth shut, waiting.

Steve, on the other hand, did not stay quiet.

"Mind your own business," Steve hissed furiously, the seat creaking as he presumably leaned forward.

"I'm tellin' you man, if you both don't shut the fuck up, I'm gonna kick your fuckin' asses!" said the guy, his voice raising in his fury.

"Hey," Billy said to the guy's general direction. "I'm fuckin' blind, man. He's describing the movie to me."

"If you wanted to go to a movie and have your boyfriend describe it to you, you should have rented one and stayed in, faggot," the guy sneered nastily.

Billy raised his fist, half rising in his seat to punch whatever was in front of him, but he needn't have bothered. A resounding crack rang out across the theatre, followed by the high-pitched shriek of a girl.

Billy paused.

"Harrington, what'd you do?"

He felt Steve grab his hand and yank him fully out of his seat.

"We gotta go, right now," Steve urged, tugging him along. He pulled him along a row of people who shouted furiously, and then down the steps of the theatre, an uproar slowly brewing behind them. Steve was going so fast that Billy half tripped and half fell the whole way down. He was pulled around into a small corridor and then he heard the clunk of metal doors being pushed open. He felt the chilly November sun on his face as the door shut behind them.

"What'd you do?" Billy asked, unable to keep the mirth out of his voice.

"I, uh... Punched that guy in the nose," Steve confessed, sounding a little distracted, as though he were looking out for anybody following

them to seek retaliation. He was still tightly holding onto Billy's hand.

"Oh fuck," he muttered, starting to run again, dragging Billy along. Billy didn't have any clue where they were or where Steve was taking them, but he found he didn't much care. His father had called him a faggot at least once a week since he was nine and it felt incredible for someone to finally get what they deserved. He ran with Steve, who was clutching his hand tightly, feeling elated. He couldn't help but grin, the cold November wind in his face. His gut hurt a little, but even that couldn't bring him down. He felt wild and free, and lighter than he had felt in a very, very long time. After sneaking and running for about ten minutes, they stopped.

"I think we lost 'em,'" Steve panted.

"Why'd you run?" Billy asked as Steve let go of his hand. "We could've taken him."
"Ehhhhh," Steve exclaimed, uncertainly. "I don't think so. He was a lot bigger than I was expecting and his three other buddies jumped up too."

Billy shrugged. He liked bad odds. They made the victory all the more sweet. He grinned down to where he could hear Steve panting. He felt out and found a brick wall. He leaned against it and lit a cigarette, his heart beating fast in his chest, exhilarated. A few moments later, he heard the sound of a chunky pair of boots, a pair of sneakers, and the smart clicking of heels on the pavement. The girls had caught up.

"What— What the fuck was that all about?" Harley asked, gasping for breath. He could hear Nancy and Robin heaving behind her.

"That guy in there called Billy a faggot so I punched him in the nose," Steve said simply.

"I'm a damsel in distress, there was nothing I could do," Billy said around his cigarette, grinning. "Stevie was just tryna protect my honour, girls."

"Yeah, cause your chances of marrying well would be ruined

otherwise," Harley snorted, smacking him on the arm.

"I do have quite a... Dowry," (Billy adjusted his belt pointedly), "To think of."

"God, you're vulgar," Robin said, making a noise of disgust in her throat. "Do you ever stop thinking about sex? Like... Ever?"

"What're you talkin' bout, Buckley? I'm an innocent virgin who needs a big strong man to take care of me."

He extended a foot out and found Steve, tapping him on the leg. He fluttered his eyelashes, putting his knuckles beneath his chin and giving Steve a demure and bashful smile.

"Oh Jesus," Steve snorted, putting his hand gently on Billy's head, giving him a small shove. Billy let himself be pushed, his face hurting from smiling. When they finally started to make their way back to their cars, Steve was the one who linked his arm through his. Billy smiled down to his boots and tried not to think too hard about the way Steve's touch made him feel.

Robin walked up the creaking wooden stairs of her house, butterflies in her gut, her palms clammy, Harley following close behind. She alighted in the upstairs hall, her hand sliding across the thick wooden newel cap, her fingers feeling the places where the varnish had rubbed off. She swallowed and crossed the hall and stopped in front of her bedroom door. The painted white wood was covered in posters, clippings, little pieces of her personality that she had tacked up on the entrance to the only space in the world that was all hers.

"My room is super messy, just so you know," Robin warned her, her hand hovering on the antique glass doorknob. "I wasn't expecting anyone to come in, you know, nobody really does—"

"It's fine," Harley laughed.

"Okay," Robin said, licking her lips.

She opened her door. Her room was at the back of the house, the

ceiling sloping to the curve of the roof. Her walls were wallpapered in cream patterned with light blue flowers, the same wallpaper her mother had put up when she had been born. She had since plastered them almost from floor to ceiling with posters, dour looking band ensembles in black and white gazing regretfully out into space. The worn wooden floor was covered in a thick rug, her white metal bed frame clutching a double mattress covered in a mess of comforters, sheets, and pillows. Discarded clothes littered the floor, her open closet bursting with shoes and tops. Her dresser was littered in bracelets, rings, bottles of nail polish, half-open makeup palettes, eyeliner pencils... From the mirror above the dresser hung necklaces and scarves. On her bedside table she had a small tape deck, and on top of a boudoir there was a small TV and a VCR. She had white curtains hanging in her big story window, the black tiled roof over the back porch just outside.

“Well... Here it is,” Robin said, shifting uncomfortably.

“Cool!” Harley said, coming in and sitting on Robin’s bed. She pointed to a poster.

“Siouxie!” she said, grinning.

“Yeah! You like them?” Robin asked her, closing her bedroom door behind her and sitting on the rug, pushing some of her dirty laundry out of the way.

“Totally,” Harley said.

“So... Um. Are you still in high school, or...?”

“College, actually! My first semester. I’m goin’ to California state.”

“Oh!” Robin said, smiling. She desperately wanted to go to college, and she wanted to go to a college in a big city. She had spent many nights dreaming in the exact same place where Harley was sitting now about the day she could be loud and gay somewhere where nobody could tell her otherwise.

“Yeah,” Harley continued. “I haven’t declared a major yet, but I’m taking a lot of psych and sociology classes, and it’s super interesting.

I'll probably end up being a psych major, to be honest."

"A couple colleges came to the school to talk to us about our futures, and it was like— I dunno. Super confusing. They kinda come to you and assume you know what the hell they're talking about, but none of us had any clue. Like, we haven't been there yet, how the hell are we supposed to know?"

Harley laughed. "Oh, trust me... Nobody really knows what the hell is going on, least of all the professors and staff. It's kind of a best kept secret that everything is a mess."

"Well that's encouraging...," Robin snorted.

Robin bit her lip, a silence elapsing between them. She was usually so quick-witted, but Harley was so much cooler than she was and she didn't want to sound like some dumb country bumpkin. She knew that Harley probably didn't care— she didn't seem like the kinda girl who cared about that kinda thing— but still.

"Um... So how did you and Billy meet?" Robin asked her. "I mean, you said you went to school together and stuff. No offence, it just seems like you guys are kinda... I dunno. Really different."

Harley let out a little sad sigh, and Robin immediately regretted asking. "I'm sorry," she said hastily. "If you don't wanna talk about it, it's fine! I was just curious, I—"

"No, no," Harley said. "No, it's fine. It just ... Makes me sad, you know?"

She paused for a moment, her lips twisting, looking at Robin's bedroom floor.

"Well— We became friends on the playground, when we were six, at school. Billy actually used to be really quiet and shy when he was really young. He barely spoke. Kids used to make fun of him for it, called him dumb and stuff... When other kids would make fun of him, he'd cry, or run away, and they'd call him a sissy..."

Harley sighed.

“And I dunno if you noticed, but he has a really hard time reading. Kids used to make fun of him for that, too... I remember for almost the entire year of kindergarten he had no friends. Then, one day, I hit one of the kids making fun of him, and... We kinda became friends from there.”

Robin listened, her eyes wide.

“I was one of his only friends, for a really long time. He was super quiet. Then, something happened... I, um... Don’t take this the wrong way, but if he didn’t tell you, I don’t wanna tell you. It’s... I dunno. In respect for how we used to be friends I don’t wanna say.”

“I totally understand!” Robin said, her mouth dry. “It’s okay!”

“Well— Anyways. After that, he kinda got meaner. I remember one time he cornered a kid that was quiet like him and just... Beat him up, calling him a pussy... And as he got older he just kept getting meaner and meaner. Not to me— never to me— but we sort of started to drift apart. And then... When we were fifteen, he sort of snapped, acted like a total dickhead. So I stopped being friends with him.”

Robin knew Harley was censoring a lot about what had really happened, but as curious as she was, she respected her for not spilling the beans even though their friendship was certainly not what it used to be.

“His Dad gives me the creeps,” Robin said quietly. She was smart enough to know that something was going on, but Billy was so tight-lipped about his home life she didn’t know what. But something in his house wasn’t right. Harley gave her a very sad look that confirmed her suspicions.

“Yeah. He’s not very nice,” she said.

Robin looked down at her feet.

“Do you know that... Um... Did Billy tell you...”

“Tell me what?”

“That um... Well. I like girls. I’m into... Girls.”

Harley smiled slowly.

“Yeah, I know,” she said.

“Oh, Billy must have told you...”

“No, he didn’t tell me,” Harley said, snorting. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but... I could just kinda tell.”

Robin burst out laughing, covering her face with her hands, her cheeks burning red. “Oh my god, that’s so embarrassing... What gave me away?” she demanded.

“Uh...,” Harley snorted. She looked around Robin’s room, gesturing to everything, and then gesturing to her, raising her eyebrows, grinning.

“Shut up,” Robin cackled, falling over on the floor.

“Did Billy tell you that I’m a particular appreciator of women myself?” Harley said, putting her hands on her hips, smiling goofily.

“Well, he said he had a best friend in L.A. who was gay but he didn’t bother to tell us anything else,” Robin wheezed.

“That is so like him,” Harley said, bursting out laughing.

“To be honest, I was expecting someone like him. Boy, was I shocked...”

“Oh my God” Harley giggled, throwing herself back onto Robin’s bed, clutching her stomach. “Billy’s such a tool...”

“He’s less of a tool than Steve, but yeah,” Robin agreed.

“Okay, okay, okay,” Harley said, sitting up and sliding off the bed, sitting beside Robin on the floor and looking at her conspiratorially. “Speaking of people who are friends who don’t seem anything like each other, how the hell did you and Steve happen?”

“Oh,” Robin laughed, a little more loudly than she’d meant to. There was no way she could explain what had actually happened so she improvised a little.

“Well... He used to be the school douchebag, as you can probably tell. His daddy has quite a bit of money, owns a dealership... That kinda thing. But he and his Dad got into a fight or something and he ended up having to get a job this past summer, and he got a job at Scoops with me, at the Starcourt Mall here. We scooped ice cream together for minimum wage, and became friends that way. We really became friends after the... Well. The accident.”

“What happened?” Harley demanded, distressed. “The accident, I mean? Billy won’t tell me, and I don’t really wanna ask—“

“Part of the mall collapsed,” Robin explained, giving Harley the official explanation that had made national news.

“Oh my god,” Harley whispered. “I heard that, I just— Wow.”

“Billy saved us,” Robin said. “We’d definitely be dead if it weren’t for him— Me, Steve, Nancy, Max, Jonathan Byers, all of the young kids that were with us... A movie let out late, and me and Steve had to work late. Billy came looking for Max, and he found us, and... He stopped something big from collapsing on us, but it wrecked him. He was really badly hurt... Like. Real bad.”

The circumstances weren’t true, but the fact that Billy had saved their lives was.

“He seems different, now,” Harley said quietly, tilting her head to the side. “Not totally different. Not like he used to be when we were kids... Not like he was when he left L.A. ... Just. Different. Y’know?”

Robin hadn’t known Billy very well before, knowing him only as the dickhead bully from away when they were at school. Out of everyone in the world, she figured Harley would be the best judge of his character.

“After he was a little better, Steve just... Showed up at his house one day and took him for a drive... Actually, I think that Steve kinda

purposefully annoyed Billy into being his friend. He's persistent, that's for sure."

Harley smiled, letting out a soft laugh.

"I'm glad... I'm glad he found a life here, even if it's a hard one," Harley said thoughtfully, after a few minutes. "When I called, I couldn't tell if he was alone, or... He just sounded so desperate. He sounded like he was... Exhausted."

A few moments of silence lapsed between them. The ceiling fan spun lazily above their heads, whispering air through the room.

"I'm glad he has you guys," Harley said. "He and I... I think we'll always care about each other, you know? But I think we're different now. Like... Cousins who haven't seen each other in a long time. Always family but living different lives. It's good to see him, but... I don't know. It's complicated."

"You're really nice for coming out so far to see him, especially if he was a dickhead to you last time you saw him..."

"Yeah. I mean. I don't know. I was just gonna call him, just to see if he was alright, you know? Just check in... But the way he spoke to me, I just... I could hear the little kid I used to know, and that little kid needed me… At least for a little bit."

"You're really kind," Robin said, reaching out and touching her shoulder.

"I mean... I guess it's for me too. To heal me. We were so close... We told each other everything. I haven't had a friend like him since, you know?"

Robin swallowed, thinking about Steve. She understood exactly what she meant. If Steve ever started treating her badly, it would break her heart.

"Sorry," Harley said, sniffling and laughing, putting her fingers up to her eyes and wiping them. "I didn't mean to totally divulge my guts. I met you like twelve hours ago…"

“It’s okay!” Robin exclaimed, squeezing her shoulder. “Seriously! I promise it’s okay…”

“You’re a good listener, Robin,” Harley said.

“That’s the first time I’ve ever been accused of that,” Robin joked. She paused.

“You… Wanna meet our chickens?” Robin asked her. She immediately winced. Could she be any more of a country bumpkin?

Harley grinned. “I would love to meet your chickens,” she giggled.

November 25th, 1985

Max came skating casually around the corner, going toward where the school bus sat waiting, her fiery red hair standing out in the crowd of brunettes and blondes. Lucas, Mike, and Dustin trailed behind her. They had been in a heated debate all afternoon about some kid who had apparently died playing a video game called Berzerk a couple years back.

“He died because of the game, not because of a heart condition! Seriously, guys, there’s tons of evidence to suggest it!” Dustin said, gesturing emphatically.

“You’re crazy!” Lucas cried. “So you’re suggesting that he died of happiness?”

“It’s possible!” Dustin yelled back.

“If it’s so easy to die of happiness, then how come you didn’t come home from camp this summer dead ‘cause you finally got to kiss a girl, Dustin?” Mike snorted.

“Oh, shut up!” Dustin groaned, trying to smack him on the head. Mike dodged, cackling.

Max rolled her eyes, skating faster. She skated past a couple of cars in the parking lot then stopped her board in surprise. Parked in the middle of the lot was a rusty VW bus, and leaning on front of the bus were two people. She immediately recognized Billy, but the other person… Her eyes widened.

“Harley?!” she yelled, a grin splitting out across her face. She yanked her board under her arm and sprinted over.

“Heeey!” Harley greeted, grinning, leaning down and opening her arms wide. Max ran right into them, burying herself into Harley’s leather jacket. Eventually, she stepped back, tucking her hair behind her ear and staring at her, an incredulous smile on her face.

“Holy shit! How– What’re you doing here?” Max demanded, breathlessly.

“Oh, I decided to come visit your brother… Against my better judgement,” she sighed jokingly, smiling, patting Billy on the shoulder. His lips quirked.

Behind her, Lucas, Mike, and Dustin had caught up. They stared in mild trepidation at the sight of Billy and a stranger in their midst, hanging back a little and eyeing Billy with suspicion. Max turned to them, grinning.

“Guys, this is Harley! She’s an old friend of Billy’s!”

“Cool!” Dustin grinned, eyeing Harley’s jacket. He was just as afraid of Billy as the rest of them, but he tended to get over it the soonest. Lucas had made it a rule to try and stay as far away as he possibly could when given the chance. Just because he had accepted that Billy was sorry for what he’d done didn’t mean he trusted him. Max didn’t blame him. Dustin stepped forward and shook Harley’s hand vigorously, ignoring Billy. His time spent with Steve had clearly made him a little braver.

“Nice to meet you!” he said, stepping back and gesturing to his friends. “This is our party– That’s Mike Wheeler, and that’s Lucas Sinclair!”

“Your party?” Harley asked, smiling a little at Dustin, clearly charmed with him.

“Our D&D party! Our warlock is in Indianapolis right now, though,” Dustin explained, much to the embarrassment of Lucas and Mike, who winced.

“Oh, yeah! I know what you’re talkin’ about, a few buddies of mine at college play that!”

“Really?” Dustin squeaked gleefully. “Cool!”

Max watched out of the corner of her eye as Billy, leaning with his arms crossed against the front bumper of Harley’s VW bus, gently rolled his eyes. Max surreptitiously hit him on the arm, giving him a glare.

“Well– Where were you headed, Max? Home?” Harley asked.

“Actually, we were all gonna go to the arcade,” Max said, looking around at her friends.

“Here– Pile in, I got room. I can drive you guys!” Harley offered, going around to the side of the van and sliding open the door. She gestured emphatically to it.

“Your chariot awaits, adventurers,” she said, grinning.

They all piled in, Max sitting on the floor between the two front seats where Billy sat smoking on the passenger side, and Harley climbed into the driver’s seat and yanked on the rigid gear shifts, backing out of the parking lot.

“God, you’re so big now,” Harley snorted, pulling out onto the road and looking at Max in the rearview mirror. “How old are you?”

“Fourteen.”

“Fourteen? Jesus. You were like… What? Ten when I last saw you?”

“Yeah,” Max laughed. Behind her on the bench seat the boys were looking around at Harley’s van, at the posters she’d taped to the walls, the little kitchenette that was decorated in intricate graffiti and signed by countless other punks who’d ridden in the back. They looked a little gobsmacked.

“She’s *his* friend?” Mike whispered incredulously to Lucas, leaning in.

“I know! It’s crazy! She’s so cool!” Lucas muttered back.

“What the hell? He’s a douchebag! Why would she wanna be around *him* ?” Mike hissed.

Dustin coughed pointedly.

“I just don’t get it–”

“Guys!” Dustin called. He pointed to the front.

Billy’s head had turned and he was staring back at them expressionlessly.

“I’m blind, boys, not deaf,” he said sardonically.

“Sorry!” Dustin called back, giving Billy an uncomfortable smile. Mike rolled his eyes and smacked him in the belly.

“What?” Dustin exclaimed.

Max watched this interaction in distress. It was true that her friends didn’t owe Billy anything. In fact, he owed them a lot more. He’d been a dickhead and done some awful things…But lately she felt like she couldn’t look at him the way she used to. When she tried to bring up the violent dislike and fear she’d felt about him before it just wouldn’t come. Something had changed but she couldn’t pinpoint what it was. They weren’t close, and they probably never would be, but… Sometimes she saw him hesitate outside her open door, his sightless eyes staring into the hall, biting his thumb and looking like he wanted to say something to her before he moved on. She had seen

him walking the house, pacing the hallways, his spine bent, one hand sliding along the worn plaster wall, one hand over his heart, his brow furrowed. Other than the times that Steve came to get him, he lived in his room, and kept the door closed. He had become tired, restless, and pale. She knew he was in pain a lot of the time, but he never said anything about it.

Max couldn't find the words she wanted to say, so she directed Harley toward the arcade instead. When they got there, Harley parked and waved to the boys, who quickly got out of the van and yelled their thanks. Billy was staring forward into the windshield. Max looked to him and then to Harley, giving her a small look of desperation. She needed her to know that something was wrong, but she didn't know how to help him. Billy had been at his most tender when he was with Harley, and she had always been kind to him. Max was amazed that she had even bothered to come visit at all. She had a feeling Billy needed her, in this moment, in this crossroads of his life, someone from his past to remind him that he'd been different once.

Max stood up, her head bent under the roof of the van, and leaned forward, giving Harley a big hug.

"I missed you," she told her.

"Aw, I missed you too, red," Harley replied, patting her on the back. Max pulled away and hesitantly patted her step brother on the shoulder. Then she got out of the van and ran after her friends into the arcade.

Billy heard Max close the sliding door, leaving them alone in the silence of the van. After a few moments, Harley spoke up hesitantly.

"How was everything, here in Indiana? You know... Before the accident?" she asked. They hadn't had much time alone since she had arrived, Robin and Steve and Nancy always tagging along. Billy swallowed, looking away, feeling angry and confused, the boys'

whispering cutting him to the quick.

“What do you think?” he demanded, his voice low and angry. She knew full well what he’d been like. She knew how he was, better than anyone. Why would she even bother asking? He pulled out a cigarette, lighting it, keeping his head turned away from Harley. He was so unbearably guilty where she was concerned that he felt stupid for even agreeing to a visit from her. They hadn’t spoken in nearly three years. What did he think was different about him that he deserved to be around her again? Why had she even bothered? Everything was the same about him; he was still the same asshole who had let his Dad win and become someone that she couldn’t be around.

“Still… Bad?” she asked him, tentatively.

Billy laughed derisively, putting his head back against the seat. “Yeah,” he said bluntly. “Bad is a word for it.”

“One day you were at school, and the next day you were gone…” Harley muttered. “It was… I didn’t know what happened. I had to hunt down your number, you know? I actually asked Cynthia King where you went, and she told me you were in Indiana now and… Shit, I dunno…”

“I’m surprised you noticed I was gone,” Billy grunted. His gut felt twisted, his throat constricted like he was being choked. Fury and disgust churned like an uneasy tide inside his belly. He was so happy to see Harley, so horrified at who he had become, so confused as to why she even felt the need to see him again...

“Of course I noticed,” Harley said, sighing, frustrated. “I mean… I always saw you pulling into the parking lot every day. We used to walk into school every morning through the same entrance.” She snorted, sounding upset. “Or do you not remember that?”

“I remember!” Billy exclaimed, yanking his cigarette out of his mouth. “Okay? I remember! I remember everything!”

He rubbed his face with his hands, feeling like he wanted to run

away.

Run away like you always do…

"Why did you even bother to come here?" Billy demanded. "What good is it gonna do you? I became someone else, alright? I'm not the same friend you had before!"

"I know that–"

"Do you?" he cried, turning his head toward her. "Do you really? Were you expecting to come here and find out that all that– That shit I was goin' through in L.A. just magically disappeared? Well guess what! It didn't, okay? Dad still fucking beats the shit out of me, and now I got a giant fucking hole in my gut, and–"

"Billy–"

"And I'm in pain every fucking day, and– and I can't even fucking– Run away from it all, because I'm fucking blind! I'm stuck here!"

He could hear Harley crying angrily.

"I didn't expect everything to magically get better, you fucking idiot!" she yelled, her voice trembling with rage. "It was you who pushed me away! All I ever tried to do was be your friend, and you fucking pushed me away!"

Billy swallowed and bent his head, a tangled disgust boiling within. Steve's voice echoed in his head. *I'm just trying to be your fucking friend!*

"When you answered the phone, you sounded a little like the old you… I guess I was stupid and I thought that coming to visit you was a good idea. I thought maybe you wouldn't try and push me away again, that maybe you'd realize that I was always just trying to care about you, but– But now, I get here.. And…"

Her voice broke a little, anger still wobbling on the edges of her tear-torn voice.

“And you’re still trying to push me away. You’re still trying to push your new friends away, your sister away… Everyone. I’m just…”

He felt a hand on his knee.

“I just don’t know what’ll happen to you if you succeed.”

Billy’s mouth parted, his head staring forward into the windshield of the VW Bus, his cigarette burning down to the filter in his fingers. He thought about the note he had written in his car in the Hawkins Middle School parking lot, his short letter in scrawled blue pen. Dully, he realized that the moment he’d put pen to paper, he had succeeded.

“I did,” he whispered, his body very still.

“What?” she asked, sniffling loudly, pulling her hand away.

“I did push everyone away. I had nobody. Last year.”

Harley didn’t say anything for a few moments.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I…”

In his mind’s eye, he felt Max’s awkward hug, saw Steve listening to his shitty apology, his brows furrowed, amazed and confused that Billy would even bother.

“I apologized. And for the first time… Someone forgave me,” Billy whispered.

He heard the seat creak as Harley leaned back in it. She let out a small, quiet breath, as though what he had said had stunned her. His eyes were wet. Pushing Harley away had ripped a bigger hole in his heart than the Mind Flayer would ever be able to do, and having Harley in his life again, wanting to be around him, felt like that same hole was healed again, flesh woven seamlessly over a wound that had

been bleeding for a very, very long time. He realized he owed her an apology, one that she had deserved to hear a long, long time ago.

“I am so, so sorry,” he said. He could barely speak. “I know it doesn’t make it better… But I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” Harley whispered. She leaned toward him, gathering him in her arms, sniffling loudly.

November 27th, 1985

Steve was lying down on the carpet of his basement, something he found himself doing quite often. His hands were folded neatly on his chest, his ankles crossed. His eyes were closed. They had all gone for a hike earlier in the day along a lakeside trail just outside of town, and it was slowly getting dark, the light fading across the pines in the backyard. He turned his head toward the couch, his eyes opening a little, and regarded Robin, who was melted against the arm, into the cushions. Tucked under her knees were Harley’s feet, who was stretched out, her eyes half-closed, looking sleepy. On the armchair, Nancy was curled up like a seashell, holding a magazine, the pages flipping quietly as she read. Steve turned his head to his other side where Billy was laying on the carpet near him. Unlike the rest of them, he looked tense, his brows furrowed, a small frown on his face. Steve blinked and looked at Billy’s hands curled into fists over his chest.

“Hey,” he said, reaching a hand out and tapping Billy on the side with it. “What’s up?”

“Nothin,’” Billy mumbled, shrugging slightly.

“Are you hurtin,’ buddy?” Steve asked him quietly.

Billy gave a half-shrug, which to Steve was a resounding yes. Normally he denied it outright. Their hike must have been a little too much activity for him. Even though Billy had gotten the injuries he had doing something heroic, he seemed to be sensitive to the fact that he was in a lot of pain, like people taking notice of it was

embarrassing. Steve respected it enough to be quiet about it, but he also knew that it wasn't good for him to be so tight lipped. It wasn't like Steve thought he was a weakling or anything— who would? — he just had a funny feeling that the only person who didn't know it was okay was Billy.

"Alright," Steve grunted, sitting up and yawning. "I'll get you somethin.'"

"It's fine," Billy protested, half sitting up. He winced visibly before catching himself.

"Well, even if it's fine I'm gonna get you something anyway. Just to make me feel better. Alright?"

Billy frowned and lay back down slowly.

Steve got to his feet and scratched his belly, smoothing down his hair. He hopped up the basement stairs into the foyer of the house, going into the downstairs bathroom. He rummaged through the medicine cabinet until he found some Tylenol. He wasn't sure if this would help exactly, but he figured it might at least ease the pain a bit. He took a couple pills and grabbed a glass of water from the kitchen, going back downstairs. When he alighted into the basement living room, Billy was where he'd left him. His eyes were closed, his lips a hard line.

"Here," Steve said. "Tylenol and some water."

Billy moved his hand to the carpet, trying to lift himself up, moving very slowly. He let out a hiss of pain before he could stop himself as he finally made it upright.

"You okay?" Harley asked him sharply, half rising from the couch.

"I'm fine!" he grumbled.

Harley slowly sunk back onto the cushions, giving Steve a look. Steve gave her a tiny patient smile, shrugging. Billy took the glass of water and the pills, swallowing them with a gulp. He handed Steve back the glass of water, which he put on the coffee table. He slowly made his way back down to the carpet, screwing his eyes shut. Steve looked up

and caught Nancy's eye.

"Is he okay?" she mouthed at him, concerned.

Steve nodded, blinking slowly at her and smiling softly.

He let Billie Holiday continue to croon on the turntable, telling them all of the familiar places where she would see them again, and Steve lay back down beside his own Billy, his head turned toward him. He watched as his chest rose and fell beneath his white t-shirt, his palms wide against his heart and his sternum, like he was trying to hold something in, trying to keep something from breaking out. Maybe he was, in a way.

Steve looked at him without seeing, his mind drifting. It was Thanksgiving tomorrow, a holiday that he felt unbelievably neutral about. He was almost certain it was just an excuse to eat turkey and trap your relatives into conversations about politics, and that the whole story behind it was horse shit and kinda fucked up. Normally his family's Thanksgivings were spent at the Glen Country Club outside of town, an event hosted by his Mom and her army of fellow middle-aged ladies with nothing to do. It was basically a schmooze-fest where his rich yuppie parents toasted to other rich yuppie parents and everyone got a little too drunk and spilled far too many scandalous secrets about everyone else. Unusually, his mom hadn't mentioned it to him until the day before. Normally she was hounding him to remember to bring his good clothes, get his shoes shined, that sort of thing. When he'd finally asked her about it, she'd given him some story about there not being enough seats and that she didn't think he'd want to come anyways.

He had been floored. His own mother had uninvited him from Thanksgiving.

She had technically been right– he didn't really want to go– but it was what he'd been doing every year since he was eight years old. He sort of expected it, like the inevitably of rain in the spring. Now it seemed like she didn't want him there, like she was reluctant to bring him. A part of him wanted to believe that it was innocent, that she had finally realized he didn't like to go and had just assumed his answer… But the fact that she hadn't even bothered to ask kinda

hurt. A vindictive part of him felt like there was another reason she didn't want him to go; namely, all of her fellow society ladies had sons and daughters who were off to college, getting degrees, starting their careers, and being successful. Sandra Harrington's son hadn't gotten into any colleges, and worked at the local video rental store for minimum wage.

He pursed his lips angrily, thinking about it. It would be very easy for her to brush off questions of his whereabouts by saying he just didn't want to come. He could practically hear her, sighing, trying to garner sympathy for her son, who was clearly on an errant path. He snorted softly to himself, crossing his arms over his chest. His Mom was usually pretty kind to him, but the pressure of his lack of success was clearly taking its toll. Both of his parents had obviously held very specific ideas about what their son was going to be doing and when, and his refusal to follow that plan seemed to be distressing them greatly. He didn't really care about Thanksgiving. It was a stupid holiday. He had always believed that. But the fact that he was going to be alone, uninvited from his own family's get-together? It stung.

He blinked and saw Billy, slowly concentrating on the pain, waiting for the Tylenol to kick in. He spun his head around and watched as Robin and Harley did a silent poking war on the couch and as Nancy adjusted herself in the loveseat. Screw the Country Club. Screw the douchebag college kids and their douchebag parents.

"Hey, I was thinking… Would any of you guys wanna have a Thanksgiving dinner here some night?"

November 30th, 1985

"Hold the bird tight!"

"I *am* holdin' the bird tight! You're just stuffin' too hard!" Billy grunted, clutching the roasting pan holding the turkey.

"Well I wouldn't have to if you just held onto it better, come on man! Seriously!" Steve groused.

“Seriously!” Billy mocked.

Steve grabbed some stuffing from a bowl beside him and held the top of the raw turkey, shoving his hand in. It felt disgusting. He had never stuffed a turkey in his entire life... In fact, (he was embarrassed to admit) he had never actually cooked much of anything in his life. Before his Mom and Dad had left for their little weekend vacation, he had interviewed his Mom for nearly an hour, taking detailed notes on her turkey cooking practices, her stuffing recipe, potatoes, pie... He ended up with four pages worth of notes, each page crammed with text.

“Damn Steve... If you’d have put this kinda effort into school you might be in college right now,” Robin snorted from across the room where she was peeling vegetables, holding the notes and flipping them over in her hands.

“Wow thanks, Robin,” he grunted, shoving more stuffing into the bird. Billy let out a small noise of discomfort.

“Oh— shit, you good?” Steve asked him, looking up.

“Yeah,” he grunted.

“Tender?”

“Mhm.”

“You should go sit then, don’t wanna tear anything...”

“It’s fine,” Billy said, his jaw working.

Steve gave him a skeptical look. “Seriously, man, one of the girls can do it...”

“I’m good. It’s fine.”

Steve looked at him and saw how determined he was. Maybe he was just sick of feeling like he couldn’t do anything... Steve shrugged a little.

“Alright, dude, but if you completely wreck your guts it’s not my

fault."

"You're gonna wreck my guts anyways, Harrington... I'm pretty sure you're gonna give us all food poisoning…," Billy snorted, pushing down on the pan as Steve shoved some more stuffing in.

"I'm not gonna give you food poisoning, Jesus! A little faith from the peanut gallery might be nice!"

"I think you can do it, Steve," Harley called, laughing, from the kitchen table, waving an encouraging paring knife and a half peeled potato at him.

"Thank you, Harley!"

"I notice that Nancy is being very quiet," Robin giggled.

Nancy lifted her hands, smiling into her pile of potatoes, motioning zipping up her lips.

"Wow, Nancy! Really?"

"Oh my god, Harrington! Would you shut up and stuff the goddamn turkey already? You're takin' a fuckin' lifetime!" Billy exclaimed. Steve pursed his lips and took a giant glob of stuffing from the bowl, cramming it into the bird, muttering darkly.

"What was that?" Billy asked him.

"No faith! None of you!"

"I mean, I seen you scoop ice cream, I know what to expect," Billy smirked.

"Wh— I thought you didn't know I worked at Scoops?"

"Naw, I seen you. I was on a date, goin' to the movies. Saw you and your stupid little sailor outfit... You'll never live that one down, hey buddy?"

"Hey! I fought Rus— I fought some pretty tough guys in that stupid little sailor outfit! And I won!"

“Ehhhh, won is a strong word,” Billy said.

“I got a strong word for you,” Steve muttered, shoving the last bit of stuffing in the bird. He’d never appreciated how much hard work it was. He was sweating. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand.

“Damn, Baby Blue,” Harley chortled. “I thought Indiana was supposed to be boring. Now I’m hearing about fist fights and sailor outfits...”

“Oh, you don’t know the half of it,” Robin laughed, throwing some of her turnip peel into the paper bag in the middle of the table.

“Baby Blue?” Steve asked, snorting.

“Yeah,” Harley grinned. “That was his nickname. Usually I shortened it to Baby. It kinda stuck. Even some teachers called him Baby.”

“Seriously?”

“Hey, it’s better than ‘The Hair’ Harrington,” Billy mocked.

“I dunno if it is, *Baby* ,” Steve mocked back. Billy smirked.

“Hey, Stevie, you don’t gotta sweet talk me, I’m already here.”

“Oh, shut up, whiny Baby,” Steve sighed. “We’re good, by the way. That was the last of the stuffing. He reached onto the counter and grabbed a dishcloth, cleaning his hands. Billy let go of the roasting pan and crossed his arms, leaning against the kitchen counter. Steve picked up the pan and took it over to the sink, filling the bottom up with water the way his Mom had instructed. He looked sidelong at Billy as the pan filled. His head was tilted slightly downward, something he did a lot now that he couldn’t see, his pupils unfocused somewhere ahead. His ear was turned toward the girls who were chatting at the table. He had a dangling earring in, the kitchen light catching it behind his curly hair. He was wearing a short sleeved button up in a light blue, tucked into a pair of worn denim jeans, his sock feet folded over themselves.

“Uh, Steve, I think that’s enough water!” Nancy called. He jumped

and looked down at the turkey, which was half submerged in liquid.

“Shit!” he swore, tilting it slightly and pouring some out. When he lifted the pan from the sink and took it to the warm oven, Robin looked at him and raised her eyebrows. He shrugged back at her.

"What’s up?” he asked her.

“Nothing at all,” she said, looking back down at her turnips.

Steve looked out across his table spread and smiled, putting his hands on his hips as his friends sat down to their meal. The turkey was carved and picturesque on the table, the vegetables in pretty bowls, his Mom’s best dishes laid out just right...

“Pretty fuckin’ good if I do say so myself!” he exclaimed happily, clapping his hands together. He reached behind him and grabbed a wine bottle, unstoppering the cork and coming around to pour generous measures in his friend’s cups.

“Smells edible,” Billy sniffed, leaning forward in his chair toward the turkey.

“That’s ‘cause it is edible. Not only edible, it’s delicious,” Steve said as he poured wine into his glass.

“I gotta say, Steve, I’m impressed. Your ice cream cones were so sloppy, but this is really something,’” Robin complimented him, smiling, rolling up the sleeves of her sweater.

Nancy leaned over and put her hand gently on his arm.

“It’s really nice, Steve,” she said, smiling softly up at him.

“Thanks,” he smiled down at her, his cheeks glowing pink.

Steve felt like there weren’t a whole lot of things that he had done in his life that he was proud of. A lot of his accomplishments felt unearned, or insignificant. He could fix a car because his Dad had taught him. He could play basketball really well, sure— But he hadn’t been smart enough to get into college, and he knew he wasn’t

talented enough to bring those skills to those teams. He felt like all the things he'd accomplished were petty and meaningless things. He knew he'd changed a lot in the past two years for the better, but the downside of changing was coming to the uncomfortable realization that the highs he had been riding in high school didn't really mean anything in the long run. He had always been a lazy student because he had never felt the need to think about the future. It had never mattered. And now that it did... He felt like he didn't have a lot to show. It felt sappy and cliche, but... Looking out across at his friends, gathered around a meal he'd worked on himself? It felt like something tangible, something he could point to and be proud of. He knew it wasn't that impressive, but two years ago he would have never even tried. That felt like it counted for something.

He poured wine in his own glass and looked out across the table, the heads of his friends all turned toward him. He looked at the meal and let out a deep breath, a quiet pride blooming in his chest. He didn't really care about Thanksgiving itself— it was kind of a fucked up and disrespectful holiday, and usually brought more discomfort and pain to most families than anything else— but he was happy to do something with his hands, see something simple and pleasant turn out for once and get to share it with people he actually wanted to be around.

He lifted his wine glass.

"Uh, I guess you're supposed to toast at a dinner like this, so I guess I'll do it. Um. This year has been.... So fucking weird. And for a lot of us, it's been really hard... But... It's also been good, in a lot of ways... I mean. I'm thankful that I met Robin..."

He gestured to her with his wine glass.

"I know it might seem weird to be thankful for someone who spends their whole day razzing you, but it turns out I am thankful. I needed it."

Robin laughed. "Aw, Steve..."

"And— I'm super grateful to have met you too, Harley, I mean, come on... I'm so fucking lame, like seriously," he chuckled. "You're

literally ten times cooler than all of us, and now I'm probably at least one percent cooler just knowing you."

"Yeah, you Indiana kids aren't cool at all," Harley teased, nudging Robin, who opened her mouth in mock offence.

"No, it's true!" Steve laughed. "And... Well. I get to hang out with you again too, Nancy. I definitely need your brain in my life, I'm too stupid to get through life without it..."

Nancy gave him a half amused, half sad smile. 'Oh stop,' she mouthed at him.

"Um... And I finally got to know you too, Billy. I know we didn't start out very smooth, but... Sometimes you gotta punch a guy in the face before you know you can be friends with him, right?"

Billy's head was turned to him, listening, but his expression was unreadable, looking somehow like he was apart from them even though he was near. Steve had seen the way he circled around the things that he really wanted to say, how he composed his gestures, how he curtained his heart. Sometimes it made him very sad, but he knew from experience that he couldn't drag parts of someone into the light until they were ready. They needed to be willing to step across the threshold to greet you.

Steve licked his lips. He raised his glass.

"To us," he said, smiling, his cheeks red. He hoped he had done an okay toast. He'd heard his mother make many incredibly lovely toasts over the years, and his definitely wasn't up to scratch with any of hers... But it was from the heart, so he hoped it was enough.

"To us," they all repeated back to him, raising their glasses. He drank, and they all did the same.

He sat down, looking at Billy, who had his head tilted toward him, sipping his wine. He put the glass onto the table, his lips parted, his brow furrowed.

"What's up?" he asked him quietly, so only Billy could hear him. He flicked his eyes out across the table. Nancy, Robin, and Harley were

busily chatting and passing dishes.

Billy licked his lips. “Nothing,” he said, shrugging. Then he turned to Harley and asked her for the turkey. Steve watched him for many moments and quietly hoped that one day he’d be brave enough to say the things he so obviously was desperate to say.

Steve walked into the living room and snorted in laughter, throwing a hand towel over his shoulder and putting his hands on his hips.

“Hey, lazybones, wake up!” he called into the room.

Four voices groaned back at him. Nancy was curled in the love seat by the window, her legs tucked under a blanket. On the long sofa, Robin sprawled on her back, her feet on Harley’s lap, who looked like she had melted into the sofa cushion. Billy was lying in his Dad’s recliner, his feet propped up, sipping a beer and looking extremely sleepy.

“Come on! Someone come help me with the pie!” he urged.

“The pie?” Robin demanded, laughing. “Oh Jesus…”

“I dunno if I have room for pie… ,” Harley snorted, leaning her head back.

“Make it yourself, Harrington…,” Billy yawned.

“I did, I just gotta mix it. Our mixer is screwed up, though. I need someone to hold the bowl… Wink wink, nudge nudge… Your name starts with B and ends with ILLY.”

Billy groaned. Steve would have normally pestered someone who didn’t have a hole the size of Texas in their chest that was still on the mend, but if his hunch was correct, Billy secretly enjoyed helping, and wanted to start getting back to doing things he could have done before. Holding a bowl while Steve beat pumpkin pie mix within an inch of its life was a good start.

“Oh, come on, you did a good job with the turkey…” he whined, kicking the side of his Dad’s recliner with his sock foot.

Billy slowly sat up, putting his beer can on the side table.

“Fine...,” he grumbled, getting slowly to his feet. Steve smiled. His hunch had been correct. If it hadn’t, wild horses wouldn’t have been able to move Billy from that recliner. Billy put a palm on the middle of Steve’s upper back and followed him into the kitchen. He had been in Steve’s house a few times by now, but he was more familiar with the basement rec room where they spent most of their time than anywhere else. Steve parked him near the counter and slapped his hands on the bowl.

“Okay, you ready?” Steve asked him.

“Mmhmm.”

Steve put the hand mixer in and turned it on. It was an ancient thing, something his Mom had gotten as a wedding gift back in the 60s, and it had mixed more cakes, pies, and squares than any other hand mixer in the Midwest. Unfortunately, that meant that it was now an extremely temperamental piece of machinery that his mom refused to replace because, according to her, ‘It was still good’... Never mind the fact that it looked decrepit and that it had a mind of its own, sputtering strangely and sometimes speeding up when it wasn’t supposed to. His Mom liked to joke that it was her own Mom’s ghost haunting it just to tease her, but Steve put its behaviour down to faulty wiring and a silent plea for someone to finally put it out of its misery. Half a page of his four pages of notes were dedicated to the care and handling of this hand mixer, and he was a little wary to use it at all... But it wouldn’t be a proper Harrington pumpkin pie if he didn’t.

The pie filling spun and turned as the mixer whipped the ingredients together, the bowl spinning ever so slightly in Billy’s grip as it worked to blend the thick filling. Steve was just about to take it out when it gave a strange sputter.

“Ah, shit...,” he muttered.

“What?” Billy demanded.

“This mixer is kinda old...”

“Well, you should turn it off then...”

“Yeah... Crap! It won’t turn off,” Steve yelled, half laughing, flicking the switch.

“Well— then unplug it, stupid!”

“I’m trying—“

“Steve—“

He yanked the cord from the wall. The mixer went one way and Billy, holding the bowl, went another. Something wet and heavily spiced with cinnamon splattered onto his face. He winced, putting down the mixer on the counter, wiping his eyes. When he opened them, he was met with the sight of Billy standing stock still in surprise, still holding the bowl, looking somewhere between royally pissed off and extremely amused. He looked like he had been splattered with orange paint, pie filling dripping from his face, his hair, staining his nice blue shirt. Steve looked down at himself and saw that he was in a similar state.

He looked around the kitchen and let out an incredulous laugh.

Pie filling had somehow made it onto the counter, the floor, the ceiling, the cupboards... Little orange flecks were *everywhere* .

“Uh...,” Steve snorted, unable to hold back the grin that was splitting across his face. “It, uh...”

He giggled loudly, unable to stop himself. “It’s uh... Well it’s uh... Wow!”

Billy let out one loud bark of laughter. Steve’s head spun up, staring at him in amazement. Billy looked like he had surprised himself by laughing, and turned his head from side to side, like it had been totally involuntary. He looked like he was fighting very hard not to grin.

“Oh my god, what the hell happened?” Nancy cried, coming into the kitchen.

“Holy shit! What the hell did you do?” Robin demanded, cackling.

“What?” Billy said, a small, genuine smile breaking out across his lips in spite of himself. “Haven’t you guys ever seen a pie before?”

Steve looked at Billy, a wide grin stretching the corners of his mouth. Billy turned his head toward him, still holding the bowl. Steve dissolved into laughter, reaching out and wiping pumpkin pie filling off of Billy’s cheek with his finger. He popped the finger in his mouth.

“Mmm,” he said, “I can taste the crust and everything...”

Billy rolled his eyes and berated him loudly for not knowing how a hand mixer worked, but the little genuine quirk of a smile that lifted his lips in their corners told Steve that he wasn’t that mad— Not really.

Sunday, December 1st, 1985

Robin watched the end of the joint burn and felt like her heart might beat right out of her chest, a melancholy sadness settling over her like a shroud. She was sitting shoulder to shoulder with Harley, a blanket wrapped around them, on the roof over the porch outside her bedroom window. Tomorrow, Harley was leaving, heading back to her life in L.A. Robin took a puff from the joint, exhaling, watching the smoke rise up into the clear night sky, and wondered what the hell she had ever done before she’d met Harley. She had been like a breath of fresh air, like a sudden warm breeze at the beginning of spring, someone who lit up rooms just by being in them. She was leaving bright and early, before most of Hawkins would even be awake. She had a long drive ahead of her, and Robin wanted nothing more than to jump in the van with her and leave for California forever.

“Kay, so... I’m not the only one who sees something going on, right?” Harley said, smirking, interrupting Robin’s thoughts.

She looked up at Harley, her heart beating fast in surprise. Was she that obvious?

“Something going on?” she asked, her voice a little squeaky.

“Yeah, you know... Between Baby Blue and Stevie?”

Robin coughed and spluttered, laughing in relief, putting her hand up to her mouth and passing Harley the joint.

“Billy thinks he’s so subtle,” Robin hissed, laughing.

Harley took a puff, giggling.

“Girl, does Steve know yet? Like... Does he even realize what he’s doing?”

“No!” Robin wheezed.

“Oh my God!” Harley giggled, coughing. “He’s got no fuckin’ clue, huh?”

“None! Not a godforsaken inkling!” Robin cackled.

“Damn... And, of course, poor Billy’ll never say anything...” Harley sighed.

“No... Well... He kinda did, last month,” Robin said, shrugging and taking the joint. “He actually told me he liked guys too, when the three of us were at a mall in Indianapolis... It was... It was so crazy, you know? Like I knew about people like me, like I knew they existed, but... Hawkins isn’t like that, you know? It’s sorta... Everything has to be in it’s stupid little category, and if you don’t fit, then... You’re nothing.”

“Yeah,” Harley nodded, smiling in sympathy. She gave Robin a nudge.

“You tell anyone about you other than him and Steve? Your mom?”

“No,” Robin snorted. “You?”

“Yeah,” Harley smiled, leaning forward and putting her head on her bent knees, her red hair blowing gently in the night breeze. She looked at Robin, smiling at her. Robin looked back, her heart beating

faster. A girl had never looked at her the way that Harley was looking at her, tenderly, knowing exactly who she was and liking her for it.

“What’d your parents say?” Robin asked her, her mouth dry.

“Well— They were a little weird about it at first. But they warmed up, ‘cause, I mean...”

Harley turned her head to look out into the dark field behind Robin’s house, the moon high and cold in the sky.

“At the end of the day, I’m still me, right? I’m just telling them parts of me that were there all along, but letting them see those parts. And they love me, a lot. So they got used to the idea. And now it’s okay.”

Robin wanted to cry, and she didn’t know why. She felt so bottled up sometimes she felt like she was going to explode. Her Mom had never said anything bad about gay people, but it was different when it was your own kid and not some abstract idea that you thought was never going to impact your life.

“I— I want to tell her,” Robin confessed, sniffing quietly. The joint had burnt down to a roach, so she crushed it against the roof tiles. “I just... I don’t know...”

“Oh,” Harley said quietly, sweetly, lifting her head. “Hey... Don’t cry...”

Harley leaned back against the house, pulling the blanket close and put her arm around Robin, leaning her head on Robin’s shoulder.

“It’s okay. You’re here, right? And you got good friends... And they love you. And when the time’s right, your Mom’ll love you too. I mean—,” Harley laughed. “Not everybody would let some random punk girl sleep in their house, right?”

“Right,” Robin sniffed, smiling. “Yeah, you’re right... It’s just... Scary...”

“Yeah...,” Harley said, blinking. “It’s super scary. I mean... I still haven’t told a lot of people. But I think it gets easier... The more you

do it. And if someone doesn't want to love you, even though you showed them your heart and who you are, then... They aren't worth your love. Right?"

"Yeah..."

Harley looked out across the field, then looked at Robin, gazing at her, her pretty dark eyes half lidded, her face scrubbed clean of the cool, dramatic makeup she liked to wear, her lips lovely and mauve, the soft golden light from the lamp just inside her bedroom window glowing on the brown skin of her cheeks. Robin felt like she was looking at an angel.

"It's really beautiful here, you know?" Harley said quietly, staring straight into her eyes. She tucked a lock of her bright red hair behind her ear and smiled so softly that Robin felt like she could have died happy right then and there.

"Will you write to me?" she asked Harley in a rush. She squeezed her eyes shut, embarrassed. "I... I mean, if you want... If you're too busy, I get it, you're in college—"

"I'll write you," Harley smiled at her. "It would make me... Really happy to write to you."

"Okay," Robin whispered, her heart hammering, feeling light as a feather.

"So... I didn't wanna ask, but... Did I hear Steve almost say he fought *Russians* ?"

"Oh... Jeez... Okay. This is a long story..."

7. "Say You, Say Me" – Lionel Ritchie (1985)

December 15th, 1985

Billy and Max awoke early in the morning to the sound of breaking glass. Billy jumped awake, the noise startling him from sleep. Muffled shouting followed the crash as he slowly became aware of himself. It was sunny. He could tell by the heat beating down through the windows onto his legs, his head a little cold in the shade. He heard a shrill voice yell something, and then his Dad shouting.
"Neil— it's just—"

"It isn't just anything! What the fuck is wrong with you? You can't do anything right! I swear to fucking god—"

He heard a small clunk, and Susan cried out in pain. Then, he heard a door fling open.

His heart hammered in his chest and he sat up abruptly. Max had hung a metal sign on her door last year, and he could hear it swinging against the wood. His mind was empty, his entire body filled with urgency as he got up from bed and quickly made his way to the door, kicking laundry and shoes out of his way. He grappled for the doorknob, yanking it open, just in time to hear Max yell.

"GET AWAY FROM MY MOM!" he heard Max screech, and Billy couldn't see what was happening, but he sure as hell knew what was coming. His Dad's silence was more foreboding than his shouting had been. Billy stumbled through his door, his hands scrabbling along the walls like he was navigating a dark cave.

"GET OFF OF ME!" Max sobbed, her voice furious, the hollow sounds of her hitting Neil with her free hands resounding in the kitchen.

"Dad," Billy called loudly, appearing at the kitchen entryway. "Stop."

He heard a thunk, as though Max had been let go and caught herself off balance. A tense silence followed where he could hear Susan sniffling somewhere in the kitchen. Billy stood his ground. He heard

Max walk over to where the snuffling was coming from, and he listened as they walked away. He was left alone with his Dad, who was breathing heavily.

"She broke a fucking dish, one of the good ones," his father explained, obviously trying to get his anger under control.

"So what?" Billy asked coldly. "It's a fucking dish."

He could almost hear his father's teeth grinding together.

"You're right," he said finally, though it sounded as though this admission felt like needles in his mouth.

"Let it go," Billy bit.

He turned around and returned to his room, slamming the door behind him and sitting on the edge of his bed, curling and uncurling his fists, rage and fear coiling in his gut like fire. He smoked several cigarettes, not knowing what time of day it was, until he heard a small knock on his door.

"Who is it?" he called out angrily.

His door opened with a little squeak.

"It's Max."

She sounded tired and subdued. He clenched his jaw. After a few moments he sat down heavily on his bed and patted the mattress beside him. He heard her come into the room, her socks sliding on the glossy stain of the wood floor. She closed the door behind her with a small snap. A few moments later he felt her slight weight on the bed beside him. She wiped her nose, sniffing.

"I told Mom we should leave," Max said.

"Good," said Billy. "Go pack your bag."

"She wouldn't leave," Max whispered.

Billy clenched his jaw. He had seen this coming, but had hoped that

Susan hadn't been pulled into his father's clutches like his previous girlfriends had been. Unfortunately, it seemed the fight that was left in her was quickly depleting.

"She said she didn't want to cause a— A fuss... She kept saying it's fine... It's not fucking fine, not at all..."

Max's voice was trembling. He grabbed another cigarette and lit it. He had no idea what to say to her. He had tried his hardest to be as big a pain in the ass as possible, tried to make the house back in L.A. inhospitable so that Susan would leave. He'd done this mostly because he'd despised the idea of someone trying to be his Mom who wasn't his Mom, but a tiny part of him had seen Max's tiny frame and was afraid for her, afraid for what a man like Neil could do to a little kid like that. The worse he'd behaved, the meaner his Dad got in private when it was just the two of them, always sure to leave the violence out whenever Susan was around. No matter what he did to break up the relationship, she had persisted, and now she and her daughter were stuck in a shithole backwater in the middle of nowhere U.S.A. on a backroad where nobody could hear the sound of his Dad's fists hitting flesh. His Dad hadn't turned on Susan in the last five years, but… The stress of Billy's injuries and subsequent blindness seemed to have gotten to Neil. He was colder than he'd ever been. He'd started hitting Susan a few weeks ago, when Max wasn't around, and today, just then— He finally tried to hit *her*.

"Oh," Max added on, her sarcastic bite coming out strangled from the tears she was holding back."We're grounded, both of us. For no fucking reason. We're not allowed to leave our rooms."

Billy nodded. Typical Neil. He finished his cigarette and butted it out in the ashtray. He turned his head to Max, who was desperately trying not to cry and failing, sniffling loudly.

"What time is it?" he asked her.

"Seven thirty in the fucking morning," Max groused.

Billy nodded. He stood up, making his careful way to the window. He slid it open.

“Wanna drive me to Denny’s?”

“Woah. Pump the breaks, there, shitbird,” Billy said, flicking his cigarette out of the passenger side window of the Camaro and pressing the button on the console to close the window. Beside him, Max pushed the clutch and geared down.

“Zoomer,” she grinned gleefully.

He’d had to instruct her how to adjust the seat and the mirrors so she could actually reach the pedals properly, but other than that she seemed to already know her way around the car. She had stolen it once, after all. Only a couple corners had been taken on two wheels, and here and there a pedestrian had needed to jump swiftly out of the way of the speeding Camaro, but all in all, she was doing pretty good.

“Alright… What’s coming up next?”

“A long straight road,” Max told him.

“Alright. Gear up for the straightaway,” he instructed softly. A mix tape he’d made back in L.A. sung quietly in the background, the chugging beats of Judas Priest threatening that they had another thing coming.

Billy thought back to when he’d made this mixtape, back in the living room of their old house in the suburbs around L.A. He’d had Judas Priest spinning on the turntable, loudly belting out of his Dad’s expensive speakers. He’d hooked it up to his tape deck, where a cassette was curling, recording the song. He’d been sitting cross legged on the floor in front of the tape deck, waiting to stop the recording at just the right second.

The music was so loud he hadn’t heard his Dad opening the front door and coming inside. Neil had grabbed him by his shirt collar, yanking on the fabric of his t-shirt with an iron grip. Billy had spun around, startled, his Dad pulling him violently to his feet, screaming in his face, about what Billy couldn’t recall. Spittle had flecked onto his cheeks as he’d stared at his Dad in fear. Neil must have asked a

question that he didn't answer. He'd hit Billy in the face, knocking him to the floor. Billy tumbled. The tape deck had clattered over, pulling the cord and yanking the turntable across the cabinet. The needle had slid across the top of the vinyl, his Dad's expensive speakers letting out an unholy screech.

In the Camaro, almost three years later, Billy closed his eyes as the song ended. Here was the twenty seconds of silence after the end of the song, the crackling and fuzz where the connection had been ripped out, where Billy had fallen, where his father had stood over him with a raised fist. Sniffing, with a bloody nose, he had later pushed play, listening to the twenty seconds of emptiness where Neil had bruised the side of his face. Even though it was just white noise, he hadn't been able to bring himself to record over it. In the cassette where the song ended was a wrinkled bit of tape, permanent evidence of a moment in time when his father had broken the facade he gave the world and showed his true colours, tangible evidence that only read as evidence to Billy. He had listened and re-listened to those twenty seconds of silence when he had first come to Hawkins so much that he was convinced he could hear himself cry for help on the warped bit of tape.

But nobody had ever believed him. Every time he called for help, nobody came to his rescue. The only people who had believed him had been his mother and Harley, and his mother was gone, and he had pushed away Harley with his bad attitude. He had been content to be the sole keeper of his father's violent secrets. Nobody but him knew about the beast that lurked behind his father's smooth smile but him, and nobody else needed to know... But now Susan and Max knew about it too. It made him feel like he'd lost control somehow, like the agreement of anger and hurt between him and his Dad had become null and void. He hadn't realized, until that moment, that this was something he'd been afraid of. He had been dealing with his Dad's abuse pretty much alone for his entire life, and he knew he could handle it. It was a routine of theirs that wasn't right, but was how it had always been. Hearing his Dad slap and hit Susan and try to hit Max had made the violence real somehow, made his Dad even more terrifying than he'd been before. He realized that even though he'd hated Susan and Max, even though he'd been furious that Susan had never shielded him and had been desperately jealous that Max

never got smacked around… He'd never wanted it to happen to them. He'd never wanted… *This.*

"Is something wrong with the tape?" Max asked. "It's all quiet."

Billy opened his mouth, the truth on his lips, before clamping it shut. She didn't need to know about it. Neil had tried to hit her today, but he would never get away with it. Billy resolved, in that moment, that he would stay in that crappy house in Hawkins for as long as Max lived in it— And if his father ever went through with what he had tried earlier today…

He would kill him.

"Nothin's wrong with the tape," he said quietly. "It's just a little damaged."

Max slathered a blasphemous amount of syrup on her pancakes, nobody around to scold her and tell her it was too much. Across from her, Billy was crunching absentmindedly on some bacon, his head turned a little to the left toward the window.

"Is this the K-Mart side?" he asked.

"Yeah!" she said, taking her fork and cutting into her drenched pancake, taking a bite. "S'the side by th'as sta'shun."

"Don't talk with your mouth full, it's nasty," Billy said, jabbing her leg gently with his boot.

"Whatever," she scoffed. "Like you're one to talk."

"Do as I say, not do as I do," he said, taking a sip of his coffee and tapping his cigarette in the ashtray. Max snorted. That was really rich coming from him. He was probably the grossest person she'd ever met. She wondered how the hell girls liked him so much. He was nothing like the handsome, sleek guys in Cosmo wearing pastel suit jackets and white linen pants with soft, doe-eyed smiles. He was her nasty older brother who dressed rough and hocked loogies everywhere he went. He'd even farted on her head once when they'd

been a lot younger ‘cause she’d pissed him off. She honestly had zero clue how he’d managed to have so many girlfriends.
“Remember when I first met you and you farted on my head?” she asked him, swallowing her pancakes.

Billy snorted and accidentally spilt some of his coffee on the table. He put the mug down and wiped his face, a small amused smile on his lips.

“Hah... I totally forgot about that. You deserved it though, you were being a bitch.”

“I was like nine!” Max exclaimed.

"Yeah, and you were bein’ a nine year old bitch.”

“You’re so full of shit, you know you were being a dickhead!”

“Maybe,” Billy shrugged, smirking to himself.

“Uh-cheeah!” she exclaimed.

“ *Uh-cheeah!* ” he parroted in a high pitched voice. “Jesus, Max, you tryin’ to be a Valley girl or somethin’?”

“Ugh, gag me with a spoon! No!”

“ *Gag me with a spoon* !” he repeated mockingly, flipping his hair.

“Oh my god you are so annoying...”

“I know you are but what am I?” he said, crawling his hands across the tabletop to find her arm and poking her with his finger.

“Oh my God,” she growled, her eyes flinging to the ceiling. She’d almost liked him better back when he’d hated her guts – Almost. Now… Well. Max had never had an older brother, not a real one anyways. She had another half-brother back in L.A., her Dad’s son from a previous marriage. He was older than her but he’d never been around, already pretty much grown up by the time she was old enough to understand she had a brother at all. Billy had been her only older brother since she was nine years old, and they had spent

the last five years in a state of mutual dislike and disdain. Things had changed since the summer. No – It had been earlier than that. He'd been worse than she'd ever seen him before they moved to Hawkins, and even worse right after they'd gotten here. Then, something strange seemed to have come over him. He'd gotten real quiet for a while. Then, he'd apologized, and she'd had the crazy sensation that she might not ever see him again… But then, he'd showed up at the Snowball at nine thirty on the dot, blasting his music and making a few snide comments to her on the side, and the feeling had passed. He'd gone back to normal, like someone had thrown a switch.

She had no idea what had happened, but in the following months their relationship softened to one of begrudging but mutual understanding. They were both stuck in the middle of nowhere with a crap Dad— and while they never became close, they were no longer openly hostile. He'd driven them both to school every morning, silently (because they were both tired and grumpy) and then he waited for her and drove her home in the evenings, slapping his hands on the steering wheel, bobbing his head to his music. He no longer got pissed at her if she was a little late, and he had even driven her and her friends to the arcade a few times after school. They'd fallen into a routine.

The summer rolled around and Billy had graduated high school— much to her surprise— and he'd gotten a summer job at the pool. Things had seemed like they were kind of looking up. Max thought about Eleven, and her brother's face, covered in something dark and horrifying…

"Hey," Billy said, tapping her arm. "You stopped eatin.'"

It was a statement, but she knew him well enough to know what he meant by it. *What's wrong?* Max blinked and looked up into her brother's face. His stony grey eyes looked vaguely back at her. They had almost lost him.

He had almost died.

"I'm glad you're not dead," she said, in a rush. She clenched her jaw, her cheeks glowing red. She swallowed and started frantically eating her pancakes again.

Billy blinked.

“I’m glad I’m not dead too,” he said.

“I can’t do anything at the arcade,” Billy protested as Max shoved him by his back through the door. She groaned with the effort, feeling him leaning back and put most of his weight on her.

“Ugh! Stand up, you weirdo!” she yelled, and he snorted, standing up straight. He raised his hands placatingly and she pushed him by his back through the dark room, a cacophony of arcade cabinets beeping and singing. They made their way through the aisles, and she flicked her eyes to the prize counter and saw Keith, a Twinky halfway out of his mouth, staring at her in alarm. He shook his head in a betrayed sort of way as if to ask her why she’d brought someone like her brother into his most sacred space. She rolled her eyes at him. As they walked by the Dig Dug machine she peered at the scoreboard and smiled wide. MADMAX was still number one. They made their way to the back of the arcade where the pinball machines were. She grabbed his hand and marched him across the floor, parking him in front of a machine. He reached out and tapped the top of the cabinet.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a pinball machine,” Max said, shrugging. “You know that song you play in the car... ‘ *That deaf, dumb, and blind kid.... Sure plays a mean pinball!* ”

“You want me to play pinball?” Billy asked her incredulously.

“Yeah, I wanna see you become the pinball wizard!” She exclaimed, clapping her hands. “Chop chop! Do you wanna be world famous or not?”

“Max, I suck at pinball. I never play arcade games— I’m definitely not gonna be better blind.”

Max completely ignored him.

“Okay, you put your hands on the buttons—“

She took his hands and put them on either side, where the flipper buttons were.

“And I’ll shoot the ball, and tell you which button you need to press!”

“You’ve thought about this, haven’t you?” Billy snorted.

“Maybe,” Max sniffed, shrugging. “Okay, I’m putting the quarters in.”

She ducked down and plunked a quarter in, standing up.

“Okay, get ready....,” she muttered, pulling back the lever. She let go.

“Go!”

The pinball machine whirred to life, flashing. The scantily clad lady on the scoreboard holding a ring and a crystal ball declared that they were playing *Star Gazer* . The silver ball whirred upward, pinging off of pins, and came flying down toward the play field. Max watched closely.

“ *Right!* ” she yelled, at the last second. Billy’s hand slapped the button and the ball hit the end of the flipper, soaring up onto the board.

“Did I get it?” Billy called.

“Yes! *Left* !” Max screamed.

For the next fifteen minutes, Max fed the machine quarters and yelled instructions while Billy slapped the side buttons with increasing intensity.

“Alright, almost!” she yelled happily, digging into her pocket for more change. She made a face. She was out of quarters.

“Gimme a quarter,” she demanded, holding her hand out to Billy. He turned and glared at her.

“No, I’m not givin’ you a quarter,” he grumbled.

“Oh, don’t be cheap. Cough it up,” she said, rolling her eyes.

He raised his eyes to the heavens and dug in the front pocket of his jeans, taking out a couple quarters and holding them out to her. She took them, pleased as punch, and popped one in the machine. A few people had stopped by to watch, more confused as to why Max was yelling instructions than as to the fact that Billy couldn’t actually see what he was doing. Keith showed up, staring at them, chewing slowly. She caught her eye as she fed another quarter to the machine and he raised his eyebrows, gesturing angrily at Billy.

“First Robin and now you?” he asked her, keeping his voice low. “Seriously? I thought you were cool.”

“He’s my brother, stupid,” Max sneered, shaking her head. Keith raised his hands defensively and wandered away. She stood up, watching as Billy’s head turned ever so slightly to the left. He’d caught what they’d said.

“Don’t worry about Keith,” Max snorted.

“Oh, I don’t worry about Keith,” Billy smirked. He pulled the lever himself this time, the silver ball flinging through the machine and up across the playfield.

“He’s one of those nerdy assholes who– *Left!* – Who thinks he isn’t a douchebag just ‘cause he’s not popular and likes – *Left again!* – Comics and video games and shit.”

“Yeah. Reminds me of that guy that used to hang around you, what was his name?”

“ *Left!* Ugh, his name was Jeremy,” Max winced. “ *Right!* ”

Jeremy Yates had been a boy back in L.A. who she’d been friends with but who’d been deeply in love with her ever since like the fifth grade just because she was a girl and liked the same things he did. She knew he hadn’t actually liked her as a person. Guys like him

thought they were so different from the popular guys, but they were the exact same. They all just thought of girls as cool accessories to show off to their other guy friends and nothing else. She'd sorta half disliked Lucas and Dustin for those reasons when she'd first met them, but… They'd grown up. Lucas liked her for her.

"Yeah, Jeremy," he said, smirking. Then his expression fell. "Fuck!"

The ball had plunked into the gutter.

"Sorry, we're outta quarters," Max shrugged.

"Finally," Billy snorted, taking a cigarette out of the carton stuffed into the front of his jacket, taking out his zippo and lighting it. She looked over to Keith standing behind the prize counter who glared openly at Billy. Technically this arcade was a No Smoking zone, but she knew that Keith was way too afraid of Billy to come over and ask him to stop. She gave Keith a smug smile and grabbed her brother's hand, pulling him through the aisles and leaving the arcade. As they walked by the Family Video, they met someone coming out. A girl with pale skin and reddish brown hair with a sprinkle of freckles across her button nose stopped dead when she saw them, a smile growing wide on her face.

"Billy!" she called, coming right up to them and putting a hand on his shoulder. "It's Carole!"

"Oh, hey," Billy smirked. Max furrowed her brow, tilting her head. His voice sounded a little strained.

"Hey. um... I was just wondering if you wanted to come to a little party that I'm having next weekend!" Carole asked, rocking on her heels, looking at Billy like she'd just won him as a prize. "Just some cool people, y'know?"

Max blinked. Maybe Billy was an accessory too, to some girls. The thought had never occurred to her before. Billy blinked, and seemed to step almost imperceptibly away from her.

"I'm sorry, I'm busy— Thanks though."

Carole looked supremely put out. She stepped forward.

“I was just wondering, cause... Well, me and Tommy broke up, and... I dunno, I—“

“Oh,” he said, licking his lips. “I’m uh... I’m actually seeing someone else.”

Carole looked shocked. “Really? Who?”

“Friend of mine— Sorry, I gotta go. I have to help my sister with something.”

He turned to Max, an eyebrow quirking. Max blinked rapidly and gave Carole a thin smile.

“Uh, yeah, we gotta— We gotta go shopping. Christmas shopping. See you later!”

She tugged Billy away, Carole staring after them, looking angry. As they crossed the street over toward the Denny’s and K-Mart, Max nudged Billy in the ribs.

“I thought you liked that kind of attention,” Max said snottily.

“Not from her,” Billy muttered.

“Why? She’s kinda pretty,” Max shrugged. She walked toward the K-Mart entrance, partly because she wanted to make their cover story seem plausible, and partly because she actually did want to go shopping.

“Not my type.”

“Who is your type, then?” Max teased. “ *Friend of yours* ? The only friend I know you have is *Steve* .”

Billy tripped on something, staggering a little, his cigarette falling from his fingertips onto the pavement.

“Oops, sorry!” Max winced. “I’m a bad guide dog...”

Billy coughed, giving her a glare, stabbing a toe out and crushing the cigarette with his sneaker.

They wandered together into the K-Mart, Max pulling Billy by his hand. Her Mom had given her a little bit of money to buy gifts for her friends, money she'd no doubt stashed away from Neil. He didn't even like it when her Mom gave her a couple of quarters for the arcade— a crisp twenty dollar bill would have definitely caused a fight. She led Billy through the aisles, dodging old ladies toddling around waiting for the blue light specials. She turned a corner and suddenly ran right into Mrs. Wheeler, who was pushing her youngest daughter Holly in a shopping cart.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, stopping short.

"Sorry, Mrs. Wheeler!" Max called out.

"Oh, hi Max! And— Billy," she said. Mrs. Wheeler's brow furrowed a little. The smile never left her face, but for some reason she looked like she wanted to hide or run away.

"Hello, Mrs. Wheeler," Billy greeted. He also seemed weirdly tense.

"I heard about what happened," Mrs. Wheeler said, after a strange pause. "I'm... I hope you're doing a little better."

"I am, thank you," he said, very politely.

She looked down at her daughter, adjusting the strap of her pink corduroy overalls, biting her lip.

"Thank you for… For protecting Mike and Nancy. I know you… I know you helped them," she said, finally looking up at him. She looked very sad. Max wondered, not for the first time, how much Mrs. Wheeler actually knew about what was going on in Hawkins. Sometimes the way she talked when she was hanging with Lucas, Dustin, and Mike at Mike's place she could hear it in her voice, wanting to talk about it but not knowing how. Beside her, Billy swallowed.

"Um. Listen. Sorry I was rude to you," Billy said, after a moment. "I

wasn't feeling well, that day."

Mrs. Wheeler smiled overly bright and nodded. "Of course! Of course. I understand."

All of this was mystifying to Max, who had no idea that her brother and Mike's Mom had ever interacted, let alone knew each other well enough to be rude to one another. In the cart, Holly turned around and reached for them, smiling.

"Mommy, we jump in the pool?" Holly asked, her tiny voice happy and expectant.

"Wh-What, sweetie?" Mrs. Wheeler asked, blinking, confused.

"Jump in the pool," Holly repeated, pointing at Billy. Mrs. Wheeler looked at her daughter and then up to Billy, understanding breaking out across her face. "Oh! Oh, no sweetie, it's winter! We can't jump in the pool, it's too cold."

Billy let out a little laugh. "Next summer, Holly. Okay?"

"Okay," Holly agreed, waving her head back and forth, smiling.

A long pause stretched uncomfortably between the three of them.

"We should, um. We should get going," Mrs. Wheeler said finally, smiling.

"Of course," Billy said, nodding. Max said goodbye to Mrs. Wheeler and she walked away. Holly waved at them from the cart.

Max took Billy's arm an led him down an aisle of women's clothes, toward the toy section.

"I didn't know you knew Mike's Mom," she commented mildly.

"Oh… Yeah. I used to teach Holly swimming lessons," Billy explained, looking like he was lost in thought. "Uh… The day the… The day I had the… *Problem* … Mrs. Wheeler talked to me at the pool and I was rude to her. I wasn't… Well. I wasn't really…"

He stopped talking, clearing his throat quietly.

“Oh,” Max said quietly, stopping in front of a display of Lego, swallowing. It very suddenly occurred to her that Billy, under the influence of the Mind Flayer, had very nearly killed Mike’s mother. She supposed saving her life had taken the last vestiges of his strength, and when Heather came along... A chill went down her spine. She swallowed, not seeing the bright displays in front of her, not hearing The Ronettes happily belt out *Sleigh Ride* over the K-Mart speakers. The Upside Down lurked always at the back of her mind and creeped in like an infection, like a rot, always threatening to poison whatever sense of normalcy she felt she’d been able to gather. Her stomach flipped, the almost unreal image of her Mom’s bruised face from earlier that morning swimming into her mind’s eye. She felt a sudden sense of unease. Had her Mom been protecting her, all this time? Had Billy? What if Neil tried to—

Max felt a warm palm on her shoulder. She turned to Billy, staring ahead and saying nothing, his face calm and grim. Max took a deep breath.

She was safe. She would be okay.

For the first time in her whole life, she knew she had a big brother in her corner.

Billy stepped back from a scented candle, making a face.

“What the fuck does your Mom even like?” he asked, his arms akimbo.

“Your Dad,” Max said sarcastically.

“Okay, so she’s got terrible taste...,” Billy muttered to himself.

Max snorted, smacking him on the arm.

“I don’t even know why I’m botherin’ to look. It’s not like I got any fuckin’ money,” he grumbled, crossing his arms. “I spent my last few bucks on those pancakes and the pinball machine. *You’re welcome,* by

the way."

He paused, his brow furrowing, giving her a funny look. "Hey! Wait a sec— Do you have money?"

"Mom gave me a twenty last week," Max told him, picking up a green candle labelled ' *Christmas Memories* ' and giving it a sniff.

"Ew! This candle smells like boiled turkey," she giggled, putting it in Billy's face.

He batted the candle away gently, grumpily.

"So you're tellin' me you had twenty bucks this whole time and you made me pay for breakfast?" he demanded.

Max rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on, it was like five dollars. And this isn't money for me, this is money so I can go Christmas shopping for my friends."

Billy smirked and swatted at her. He missed. "How 'bout you get a fuckin' *job* , freeloader. You're old enough. Time to start earnin' your keep. Ever since the accident, it's your job to be the man in the family, Max."

"Maybe I'll get a job at the Family Video with Steve," Max said flippantly, putting the candle back on the shelf and grabbing a red one. She sniffed it. It smelled like cinnamon but in a chemical sort of way, like an alien had heard of cinnamon and tried to re-create it on another planet.

"He wouldn't hire you," Billy said, shaking his head, sniffing. "You're too rude."

Max put the candle back on the shelf.

"More like *Robin* wouldn't hire me. You think they put Steve in charge? Seriously? *Steve* ?"

"Wh— You mean he ain't in charge?"

Max stared at Billy, who looked genuinely taken aback.

“God no!” Max snorted. “ *Steve Harrington* ? No. No way. He’s pretty, but he’s clumsy and silly. What? Did he like... Tell you *he* was in charge?”

Billy blinked a few times and shrugged.

“No, I guess I just thought he was ‘cause he’s kinda like a Mom, you know?”

Max crinkled in her nose and gave him an incredulous smile. “A *Mom* ?”

“Yeah,” Billy shrugged. “Y’know, he’s always taking care of people, that kinda thing...”

Max raised both of her eyebrows and shook her head at the candle display.

“He takes care of *you,* ” Max muttered under her breath. She couldn’t be sure if Billy heard her, but the small tinge of pink on his cheeks and the look of consternation on his face told her he probably did. She grabbed him by the arm and dragged him to another part of the store. As she walked, she looked to and fro. She was trying to find something for Lucas, something that was cheap but wasn’t lame. Her friends were dear to her and they never made it explicitly known, but she definitely felt the gap between where she lived and where her friends and boyfriend lived. They’d had any toy they wanted growing up, the things Max used to dream of having. In California, the only toys that she and Billy had ever had were the sidewalks and the beaches. Sometimes she missed California. The hot weather made it so that kids weren’t so obsessed with objects the way that kids in colder climates who had to stay inside were. Someday she wanted to bring her friends there to visit, show them the surf, the bowls she used to shred, all the places she used to haunt. If she had to guess, and she would be guessing, she figured Billy felt the same way. He’d missed it a lot more than she had, and it had taken him a really long time to get used to being in Hawkins. He hadn’t really made any friends, not really.

Max looked at a rack of sunglasses.

“Hey, you and Steve are friends now, right?” Max asked casually. She grabbed a blue pair and put them on her nose, looking at herself in the mirror. Billy was quiet, his mouth open a little. She looked at his reflection in the small mirror above the rack and raised her eyebrows.

“You’re not friends?” she asked, confused.

“No, no, yeah. We’re friends. Yeah.”

Max turned around and flicked the blue sunglasses off of her face, fixing Billy with a look.

“Why’d you hesitate, then?”

He shrugged, rubbing the back of his neck. “I dunno... It’s just... Weird.”

“Well, yeah...,” Max said, rolling her eyes and turning around, putting the sunglasses back and spinning the display. “Steve is weird. You’re weird. And the fact that you kicked his ass and now you’re his friend is the least weird thing about it.”

“That’s just guy stuff,” Billy said hastily. “The whole ass-kicking incident, y’know? Just two king pins hashin’ it out.”

“Ugh, gag me with a spoon. I am surrounded by testosterone…,” Max grumbled, annoyed. “El needs to move back, stat. If I hear the word ‘guy stuff’ one more time, I’m gonna puke.”

Billy snorted. She took his hand and led him to the front of the store, a few things in her hand. She had even managed to get Billy a gift, just something small he wouldn’t notice. She paid and they left, leading Billy back to the car. She threw the plastic bag into the backseat and got in the driver’s seat, Billy getting in the passenger’s side. She started the car and made her way across the parking lot. As she turned on to Church street, she passed by a familiar burgundy BMW and flicked her eyes to the driver. Through the window, Steve glanced by her and did a double take. She grinned and waved, rocketing off down the road away from him, giggling.

“What’s up?” Billy asked.

“Oh, nothing. I just saw a cute dog,” she said.

They drove in silence. Max unconsciously drove slower, taking the long way home. A nervous energy had settled in her gut. She bit her lip. She hated to admit it, but she was terrified to go home. By now, Neil would have realized his son and his step-daughter were gone. Not only were they gone, but Billy’s car was gone too.

“Billy,” she began, unsure. “Uh. Neil. Is he—“

“He won’t do shit,” Billy mumbled darkly around his cigarette. He took a deep drag. “We caught him, this time. The grounding thing was just him panicking. If we go away and come back, he’ll just pretend it never happened. You caught him today when he thought he’d be able to get away with it so he’s gonna be on his best behaviour for a little while. Just you wait.”

Max licked her lips nervously.

“I’m afraid... About what he’s doing to my Mom,” she said quietly, in a rush, her voice trembling.

“I know,” Billy mumbled softly.

“I… God. It’s just so fucked up!” she said angrily, swallowing a lump in her throat.

"Been fucked up for a long time,” Billy agreed, his voice low. “But… It’s not your fault, alright? You did nothin’ wrong, and Susan didn’t do nothin’ wrong. It’s *his* problem.”

“He scares me,” Max admitted, her voice small, turning onto a side street.

Billy’s eyes closed. When he spoke again his voice was pained.

“I know. But you’re gonna be okay. Okay?”

Max swallowed.

“Okay?” Billy prompted.

“Okay,” Max agreed, nodding.

Twenty minutes later, when they walked in through the back door, Neil didn’t so much as greet them from the living room. Before Max went into her room she led Billy to his. She stared at him for a moment before she squeezed his hand and let go.

She really was glad he wasn’t dead.

December 22nd, 1985

Billy was freezing.

He had never seen snow until he had come to Hawkins. The brisk temperatures that had greeted him when he’d first stepped out of his car in the fall of 1984 had been disconcerting enough, but the frigid drop as the year wound down and December had rolled around had felt like a slap in the face. He’d spent the winter of 1984/1985 in a daze of thick coats and relentless fucking, rotating between Tina, Gretchen, Pauline and a couple other girls who liked to screw but didn’t like to get involved. The cold had been a bracing experience, and the first time he’d driven in the snow was the first time he’d ever felt nervous driving. He’d avoided it as best as he could, only going out when he was gonna be parked at a girl’s house for a while.

This December, he wasn’t so lucky.

“Stop dragging your feet,” Steve scolded at his side.

“I’m not dragging my feet!”

“You are *so* dragging your feet!”

“No I’m not!”

“Cheyuh! Yeah right!”

“Wow, boys, don’t strain yourselves... The mental gymnastics going

on is too much for my poor little head...," Robin said sardonically from Billy's other side.

Billy was sandwiched between Steve, who had hooked himself to his right arm and Robin who was holding onto his left. Like a very unenthusiastic group of contenders in a six-legged race, they made their way down Main Street, shuffling their way through the crowds that had gathered on the sidewalks to watch Hawkins' 39th Annual Christmas Parade.

"I don't even know why we're out here," Billy grumbled, shivering.

"Because apparently it's *fun,"* Robin said sarcastically.

"Alright," Steve grumbled, annoyed. "I get it. I'm lame, Christmas is lame."

"Oh, Christmas isn't lame, that's just you, Harrington," Billy said, elbowing him in the gut lightly.

"Alright, yeah, okay. Screw me for wanting to do something fun with my friends..."

"I personally can't wait to see all those nice floats and beautiful lights... The sight of that shit really pumps my nads," Billy continued, turning his head to the right, blinking his milky eyes pointedly at Steve. Robin snorted with laughter. He ignored the feeling that fluttered in his chest when Steve called him his friend.

"You're gonna be seeing *stars* in a minute if you don't shut up," Steve grumbled.

"Alright, alright...," Billy said complacently. "I get it. I'm shittin' all over the Christmas spirit. I'll stop."

"Will you, though?"

"Mmm... Probably not."

"Oh, hey Max!" Steve called out cheerfully.

"Are you guys *seriously* gonna watch the parade?" Max's voice asked

from somewhere in front.

“Steve’s idea,” Billy grunted.

“Ew, lame,” said Max.

“You know what? When you all get coal in your stockings, then you’ll be sorry,” griped Steve.

“I’m here with Lucas... Dustin, and Mike are here too. Apparently this is a *romantic* thing...,” Max grumbled, following along beside them.

“If it’s romantic, how come he brought Dustin and Mike?” Billy snorted.

“That’s what *I* said,” she said flatly. “Well... Have fun, I guess. I’m gonna be over by the bank with my boyfriend and his two incurable warts...”

She walked off. Billy could practically hear her eyes rolling to the heavens.

“Did I tell you guys that Dustin asked me to give him an honest to god *How-To* guide on how to French kiss a girl?” Steve said, laughing.

“And did you give him the rundown on how to French kiss?” Billy asked, smirking.

“No, I showed him,” Steve bit sarcastically. “I just like... You know, explained a few things... Gave him a few pointers. He took little notes in this scribbler like he was in school or something. It was… Well. It was a thing.”

“You’ll have to run me through your method sometime, Stevie, I’m just so inexperienced in the ways of women...” Billy guffawed.

“Oh, ha ha ha…”

“If you two ladies are finished, I think I see a good spot for us to sit,” Robin interrupted, yanking Billy’s arm to the left. She led them a little ways off, and suddenly Billy felt the pressure of the two on either side of him pushing him toward the ground. He sat.

“Where we at?” he asked. Each time he asked, it got easier, but he was still struggling with the small ways he was now dependent on others. At least it was Steve and Robin. He was most comfortable asking them. He thought it tended to freak Max out a bit.

“We’re outside Melvald’s,” Robin piped up enthusiastically. “If memory serves, he sets up a little stand each year and gives out free hot chocolate.”

“Oh, now who’s getting all excited for cheesy lame shit?” Steve teased her.

“Oh, whatever,” Robin giggled. “Shut up...”

Billy sniffed, the cold December air biting at his nose. He was wearing his warmest jacket, a black canvas coat that he’d bought reluctantly at the end of the winter season, and a knitted sweater underneath that Susan had bought him last year. They were his warmest clothes, but they weren’t enough. He was still freezing, especially his hands. He’d never gotten used to owning mittens or gloves last winter, and he still didn’t own any. His head was bare and he wished he’d thought to grab a hat before he left.

“Dude, you’re shivering,” Steve said.

“I’m not built for this shit,” he laughed derisively.

Robin snuggled close, putting her arm around him and leaning her head on his shoulder.

“Aww, little California boy’s all chilly,” she said in a baby voice.

“Fuck this weather,” Billy growled.

“Ouu! Right on time! Hot chocolate!” Robin cried out happily in his ear, letting him go and leaping up from the curb. He felt something tickle his nose.

“Hey, it’s starting to snow!” Steve exclaimed, laughing softly, unperturbed by Billy’s sour mood.

Billy turned his head toward him and noticed very suddenly that

Robin had long ago left them, and that only Steve had the sleeve of his puffy winter coat intertwined with his. He felt flakes of snow fluttering onto his hair and settling on his eyelashes and nose. They seemed to be thin flakes, the frigid air bringing crisp flurries in its wake. Billy tried to stop his shivering but he couldn't help it— He just wasn't used to how cold it got in Hawkins.

"Oh, here— I have a hoodie on underneath my coat, I can use that...," Steve said. "You can have this..."

Steve extracted his arm and placed something warm and soft onto his head, adjusting it, sliding it over his hair and wiping his bangs from his eyes.

His hat.

"There," Steve said, satisfied. "You'll be a lot warmer with that. Most of your body heat escapes through the top of your head, you know..."

All replies that Steve was a dork, a lame ass, a mother hen, and a weirdo went unspoken on his lips as he felt Steve slide his arm back into the crook of his elbow and shuffle closer, his torso flush with his right side. Billy swallowed, his heart beating inexplicably fast in his chest. He heard marching band sounds in the distance, heralding the beginning of the parade. All around him was the sound of discordant music, a hundred different conversations, laughing children, and car engines. Being one of the only links to the outside world, he found it almost overwhelming. Something twisted inside and he felt sick. At his side, Steve was humming softly to the distant sound of Christmas music, unbothered, enjoying himself like he and Billy had been lifelong friends, like Billy hadn't once almost killed him.

"Why are you being nice to me?" Billy whispered.

He felt Steve's warm breath on his face. He was so close he could feel the tickle of his hair blowing in the breeze on his forehead.

"Cause I want to," Steve replied, his voice bemused, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

To Billy, it wasn't.

“Okay, three nice hot chocolates, comin’ through!” Robin chirped from somewhere behind them. Steve was up in a moment, running over to help.

Billy, sitting with his fingers crossed over his knees on the curb, squeezed his eyes shut. After a few moments, Robin and Steve were back at his side.

“Here,” Steve said, handing him a paper cup filled with hot chocolate. Billy took it, cradling it in his bare hands, letting the warm steam waft into his face. He heard cheering and the happy screams of toddlers. The parade must have started. He tried to think of the last time he’d been to something innocent and fun like this. He blinked long, and realized he couldn’t remember. Maybe he had never been to something like this. The happy, excited atmosphere was alien to him. A little ways down he heard a mother talking to her child, asking if they were excited to see Santa. He heard the obnoxious giggles of teenagers, embarrassed to be there but unwilling to miss it. Everyone was busy, happy, worried about Christmas shopping, stockings, going to see the in-laws...

A loud marching band went by, playing an upbeat rendition of Let It Snow.

“That’s the Legion marching band. They’ve been playing at this parade since my parents were kids... I think some of the members haven’t changed either,” Steve explained in his ear, chuckling.

He jumped a little, and nodded, taking a sip of the hot chocolate. The snow was gathering on his nose and he sniffed to get rid of it.

“Oh my god, want to hear something really embarrassing?” Robin snorted, not waiting for an answer. “I used to do that— Majorettes.”

Steve laughed. “Really? Like all the little sparkly tights and everything?”

“Yup,” she said. “I hated it so much...”

“I was in Cubs and stuff. It was okay. I wasn’t really into it though. Played a lot of sports. You?” Steve prompted, nudging Billy.

Billy swallowed.

"What did we talk about? You gotta slug!"

"Ye-Yeah, I know..."

"What, are you afraid you're gonna get hurt or somethin'?"

"No..."

"Well, then, WHAT then? What? You think I want a pussy for a son?"

"Leave me alone!"

"That's right, run! Run like you always do!"

"Billy?"

He cleared his throat. "Little League, for a bit," he said hoarsely.

"Your hot chocolate is getting cold, there," Steve reminded him.

"Yeah, okay!" Billy growled.

Steve paused. "Okay... Calm down. I'm just reminding you."

They watched the parade in silence for a bit, then Robin perked up.

"Oh yeah! Guess what I brought..." she sang. Billy felt her pull something from her big coat and heard the sloshing of something in a bottle.

"I totally forgot about it until right now. Just a little somethin'-somethin' to keep us warm..."

He heard her unscrew the top and pour a little in her hot chocolate. Billy popped the top off of his drink and waited. A strange anxious flutter was flaming in his belly. He felt like he was very far away from the crowd of happy folks, far away from Steve and Robin. A part of him wondered why he deserved to be out here, with everyone, having a good time like he was a normal guy who deserved normal things. He heard a generous amount of liquor being poured in his cup, and when she passed it to Steve he put the lid back on his

cup and swirled it.

“Fair warning— This is vodka, cheap vodka. It’ll probably taste like paint thinner.”

Billy put his cup to his lips and drained it in one. Beside him he heard Steve take a swig and sputter.

“Jesus Christ, Robin!,” he said hoarsely.

Robin cackled devilishly and took a big drink.

“You want some more, big guy?” she asked Billy, nudging him.

“Yeah. Give it to me straight,” he said dully. Steve’s voice was replaying in his head, over and over, yelling at him that he wanted to be friends, that he was being nice to him just because. His mind couldn’t fathom why Steve was being so nice to him. A part of him felt like it was wrong. Many nights interrupted by nightmares and self loathing had repeated the words Steve had said to him and twisted them into unrecognizable and sinister shapes. Billy knew that Steve’s concern was wrong somehow, because nobody was ever nice to you just because. He had an ulterior motive he just hadn’t seen yet — He had to. Every time Steve called him, every time Steve showed up at his house, Saturday after Saturday, without fail, he was surprised. What did Steve get out of it? What could he possibly gain? Robin poured him some more, and he drank it more slowly this time.

“You want, Stevie?” she asked.

“No, hell no,” Steve snorted. “I’ve had enough Russian things for a while...”

“Suit yourself,” she shrugged happily, taking a slug as a float blasting *Simply Having A Wonderful Christmas Time* at full volume went by. Was this fun? Was he having... Fun? Did Robin and Steve really... Like him? He thought about gossiping with Robin at the mall, Harley crying, holding him, Max taking care of him, getting covered in pumpkin pie, Steve describing movies to him, Steve driving his Dad’s company Corvette, flying up into the air, grasping his hand, shouting in joy...

Did he deserve this?

He felt every scar on his arms where the Mind Flayer had poisoned him, every bit of uneven, tender skin on his chest and belly where he had fought back...

Did he deserve to be happy when he had caused so much pain? He clenched his jaw and closed his eyes.

Billy hadn't been this fucked up in a while— Probably since Tina's party, way back in October when he had first come to Hawkins. His consciousness flickered, short moments of darkness interrupting moments of clarity. He heard the end of the parade. He felt himself walking away with Robin and Steve. He was somewhere warm, eating fries. Then he was being led across a lawn. He staggered, his feet obeying his commands in a delayed sort of way. On one side of him was Steve, his arm wrapped around his waist, steadying him. Ahead, he heard Robin shout.

"Oh my god— Carousel. Yes. Carousel. We gotta— We gotta go on this. C'mon Billy. Let's go," she slurred, cackling in laughter. She grabbed his arm and yanked him across the snowy lawn out of Steve's grip. He heard the tinny metal creaks of a playground carousel as Robin snatched the metal bars and spun the carousel towards them. She pulled him onto it clumsily and he fell onto his side. His face was burning from the booze, and the thin layer of snow on the metal was a blessing. He rolled onto his back, bending his knees.

"Come on, Steve!" Robin yelled. "Push us!"

He felt her flop down near him, her vodka breath turned toward him, laughing. Steve's boots crunched in the snow as he ran to join them.

"Okay!"

Billy heard the creak of metal and Steve's crackling footsteps. The world began to spin. His stomach flipped and dropped as the carousel turned and turned. Robin laughed into the sky. He was grinning, his cheeks aching. He closed his eyes and pretended that when he

opened them, he would see Steve pulling the metal bar, smiling, his hair bouncing, the snowflakes settling on his shoulders as he sprinted, happy and carefree. Suddenly, there was a clunk and Billy felt air rush over his face as Steve leapt onto the carousel too, flopping down beside him. Billy turned his head toward him, his eyes still squeezed shut, a stupid grin on his face. Steve giggled loudly.

“My stomach,” Billy wheezed, clutching his guts. He felt Steve turn toward him, felt him put his head right beside him, almost forehead to forehead.

The night was late, the snow was lovely and crisp, and Billy was warm with laughter and booze. He couldn’t remember the past and didn’t care about the future. All his mind could fathom was the fact that he was alive, that he was next to Robin and Steve, spinning round and round without beginning or end. Steve was laughing so loudly, his face so close. He had long ago forgotten what loving touches were, but he craved them, was ravenous for them. He reached his hand out, his body sloppy with liquor, and found Steve’s head. He snorted and patted him gently. He felt Steve’s face grinning, felt his eyelashes fluttering against his palm.

Robin moved, sitting up. He heard a click. Steve giggled. Robin slid along the metal, grabbing his hand, lifting him.

A blink of darkness, and he was in a car, in the backseat, sprawled out, sleepy and warm. From the smell of turtle wax he could tell it was Steve’s car.

“Whe’re we goin,” Billy muttered softly.

“I’m takin’ you home,” Steve’s voice said kindly.

“Mmmkay,” Billy managed, wiping his mouth. He thought he might have drooled... Or was that vomit? He felt a little clearer than he had before. His world was swimming and threatening to slip back into the welcoming darkness of nothing. He closed his eyes and tried to listen, tried to stay awake.

The car eventually stopped, and Steve appeared at the backseat door.

“Let’s go,” Steve coaxed gently. “Come on...”

He was bundled from the car. Steve grabbed his arm and put it around his shoulders, putting his own arm around Billy’s waist. He led him to the front door. Billy’s feet felt like they were unattached, and he had to concentrate to keep himself upright. They managed to get into the door, inside the quiet house, and Billy managed to walk a little as Steve helped him into his bedroom and sat him down on his bed. His bed felt so soft, so comfortable... He flopped onto his side, the pillow cool against his face.

He heard Steve chuckle, amused. Then he felt Steve’s hands at his feet, pulling off his boots.

“There you go, buddy,” Steve said soothingly.

“Mmmmhh,” said Billy, his eyes closing, exhaustion overtaking him.

“Hey, stay awake for a few seconds,” Steve said, laughing softly. Steve took his hand, making him touch a garbage can that was on the floor beside his bed.

“There’s your garbage can, okay?”

“Mhm,” Billy hummed, nodding on his pillow.

Steve led his hand to a glass of water on his nightstand. When had Steve gone and gotten a glass of water?

“Water right here.” He tucked Billy’s hand beside his body on the bed.

"Okay buddy,” Steve said, his voice affectionate. “Get some sleep. I’ll call you tomorrow and see how you’re doin, okay?”

He listened as Steve stood up and headed towards his bedroom door.

“I know yer jus’... Jus’ bein’ nice to me ‘cause y’feel bad,” Billy called to him, shifting on the bed. His tongue felt loose, his body somewhere far away. Steve stopped and walked back over to him. He felt Steve’s breath on his face.

“Hey,” Steve said gently, his voice very soft, very quiet. Billy felt his entire body tense despite how much his muscles felt like rubber. His sloppy, drunk mind suddenly came to attention in shock and confusion. Nobody ever spoke to him like that. Steve’s voice replayed over and over like an echo in his slippery, drunk mind, each time seeming less real to him than before. He didn’t deserve that kind of softness.

“Maybe you don’t believe me….” Steve continued, his voice almost unbearably kind. “Maybe it’ll take a while for you to believe me… But… I like hanging out with you. And I like being your friend.”

Billy knew his mouth was hanging open so he shut it. He swallowed thickly, the pungent taste of alcohol sitting on his tongue.

“I like bein’ yer friend too, Steve,” he confessed, in a rush. He was sure that the only reason he was able to say this was because of the booze, but the dim part of him that was thinking sober thoughts felt glad that he was able to say it. Steve deserved it. He didn’t deserve his vitriol or his stony silence. For all that he had done for him, for his patience, he deserved to know it wasn’t in vain. Steve’s hand pressed soothingly onto Billy’s shoulder. It sat there for many minutes, his thumb unconsciously rubbing circles into his shirt.

“Goodnight, Billy,” he heard Steve whisper as he faded into sleep.

December 25th, 1985

Christmas morning was always awkward as hell in the Hargrove/Mayfield house— Namely because nobody really got along. That, combined with the fact that there usually weren’t many gifts under the tree and there was usually a fight tended to waylay any good feelings that might have accidentally come up between them. At the very least, they had a routine: wake up before nine, open gifts, eat a turkey in the early afternoon, and then go back to life as if nothing untoward had happened.

This Christmas morning was a little different.

Billy woke up to a soft knock on his door. He groaned, completely

forgetting what day it was, and rolled over. The knock got louder.

“Go away,” he moaned, throwing one of his pillows at the door.

“Billy! It’s Christmas!”

“... So?”

His door opened, pushing the pillow to the side.

“Come *on* !” Max urged, coming into the room and yanking on his arm. “They won’t let me open anything unless you’re there.”

“Ynnngg...,” he groaned, his eyes heavy. He opened them. Every time he opened them, he expected to see. He hadn’t quite gotten used to the fact that all he would see was darkness.

“Kay,” he muttered. “Alright...”

He sat up, his legs hanging off the end of the bed, rubbing his face.

“Gimme the robe on the door?” he asked, reaching his hand out. It was fucking freezing.

The terry cloth of the robe slid into his fingers and he stood up, wrapping it around himself. He felt like death warmed over.

“M’kay,” he muttered, holding out his hand. Max took it, snorting.

“I see you walking around by yourself in the house all the time, why do you need me?”

“Still asleep,” he replied, his voice hoarse.

She led him into the living room, and sat him on the couch. He leaned back, his eyes still closed.

“M’here,” he muttered.

Max didn’t wait, tearing into her gifts, the sound of the wrapping paper ripping and fluttering to the floor. She pulled out something. He heard the distinct pause of a displeased teenager trying to act like they were thankful for something.

“Thanks Mom!” she said, forcing her voice into happiness. “Um, Billy, she got me a dress. It’s cute!”

“Nice,” he said, yawning.

“Okay, here you go...,” Susan said, placing something in his hand.

He opened the wrapper, a small, familiar bottle falling into his lap.

“I saw your empty bottle in the bathroom,” she explained hastily, and he could tell she was desperate for him to like it. He knew the bottle well— *Aramis* , a cologne that had followed him to many beer kegs and girl’s beds. It was a somewhat understated gift, but he did genuinely appreciate the gesture. He hadn’t been wearing it very often lately, feeling out of sorts and tired. Maybe he should start wearing it again.

“Thank you, Susan,” he said, giving a little smile to his left.

He didn’t get too sappy— this household didn’t do sappy— but he knew what his father was putting her through and he appreciated that she paid attention to the things he liked. It was better than his father usually did. He sat quietly as Susan opened a silver necklace from his Dad (no doubt a short lived apology for his behaviour; he would be back to smacking her around soon and make up for it on Valentine’s Day with another grand gift). He obviously couldn’t see her, but he felt Max’s gaze on him the entire time their parents exchanged gifts. Susan had got Neil an expensive power tool. He didn’t miss that they spent more on each other than on their kids, but that was just the way it had always been.

“I got you somethin,’ Max,” Billy told her, shrugging. “It’s under the tree.”

There was a short moment of shocked silence before he heard her scrabbling under the boughs.

“It’s kinda dumb,” he warned her, smirking, as she ripped open the present. They didn’t normally exchange gifts, but… It wasn’t like this gift was anything fancy. He heard the jingle of quarters in a can as the wrapping paper was lifted away. Over the last month he’d hunted

the couch cushions and the pocket of his Dad's jeans when he wasn't home in search of quarters so that Max could have a stash of change when she wanted to go to the arcade.

"This isn't dumb...," she said quietly, and he could tell she was genuinely touched. She scrambled to her feet.

"I got you something too— It's super dumb," she said quickly, laughing in a half-embarrassed sort of way. He heard her digging under the tree for a package, coming over and placing it in his hands. He opened the gift and pulled out a very small box, putting it up to his ear and shaking it.

"Is this a Matchbox car?" he asked her, a small smile on his face.

Max burst out laughing.

"How did you know?" she asked as he opened the box.

"Oh, you know," he shrugged. Later he would tell Max it was because he had stolen an awful lot of Matchbox cars in his time— But he wouldn't say that in front of Neil. From the contour of the little dinkie, he could tell it was a car very like his own.

"It's not your exact car, but it looked a lot like it, so..."

Billy smirked at her and gestured for her hand. She held it out, and he took the tiny car and put it on her palm.

"Nyooooom," he said loudly, violently driving the car back and forth.

"Oh my God," Max snorted, her happiness that he liked her gift mixing with her teenage second hand embarrassment that he was acting like a little kid.

He heard his father get up and go to the kitchen. Clearly the scene unfolding before him was too sissy for him to bear. As usual, he and Billy did not exchange gifts. Billy knew, as per their custom, that over the next few days a twenty dollar bill would appear on his bed unprompted, and that a small bottle of liquor would appear in the fridge. This was their begrudging acknowledgement that they were

related.

He let Max take her hand away, and she went to go get her tin of quarters. A soft hand placed itself on his arm.

“ *Thank you* ,” Susan said softly. He looked to where she sat beside him.

He nodded solemnly. In many ways he was frustrated with the way that Susan had fallen into the pit of his father’s cruelty, and often allowed that cruelty to spill over onto him, but he knew that it wasn’t really fair. He took her thanks for what it was, a genuine and grateful acknowledgement that he had done something kind for her daughter. There were many things he wanted to say to Susan in that moment, while his father was still in the kitchen—tell her to get out and bring Max with her, for starters— but he knew there wasn’t enough time, and Susan was already moving away, going to check on the turkey.

He ran the little car through his fingers thoughtfully. His Dad came back into the room and Billy paused in consternation and he came closer and closer, then sat beside him on the couch. His Dad grasped his shoulder, and Billy tensed, confused. Then Neil put a small square gift into his hands. He put the Matchbox car aside for the moment in his lap.

“Here,” his Dad said, sniffing, obviously concerned about looking too sappy.

Billy opened the gift, his mind blank, trying to hide that his fingers were shaking.

Inside was a ring.

He pulled it out of its box and held it between his fingers. It was smooth, the band thick. It would probably fit his fingers. He could tell just by holding it that it wasn’t cheap. Billy swallowed thickly. What was this? What did this… What did this mean? He was so confused he was silent for several moments.

“Well, a ‘thank you’ might be nice,” Neil said, annoyed. “I thought I raised you better than that.”

“Oh– Yeah. Thanks. Thanks, Dad,” Billy said, licking his lips. He put the ring on his middle finger, sliding it over his knuckle, bending his head so he could hide behind his hair. Neil let out a breath, like he was angry with him and got to his feet, walking out of the room and into the kitchen. Billy had no idea how to feel. Was his Dad trying to be better? Did he want to be better? He clenched his jaw, thinking of Susan’s expensive necklace. That’s not what it was. His Dad was trying to make up for how he’d treated him, trying to make what he did okay. He twisted the ring on his finger, swallowing hard, staring down at his hands in sickened fury. He stopped just short of pulling it off and throwing it across the room. His Dad had bullied him into a corner. If he wore the ring, it meant that he forgave him. If he didn’t wear it, his Dad would accuse him of being ungrateful. He held the ring in place and flared his nostrils. Fine. If his Dad wanted to play games, he’d play. Feeling oddly elated with this decision, he leaned back and casually flung his arm across the back of the sofa. He and Max were alone in the living room and he listened for a moment as Susan peeled potatoes.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. I have another gift for you,” Billy shrugged nonchalantly.

“Wh-really?” Max asked, seemingly gobsmacked. This was the first year they had actually exchanged gifts— Two seemed almost excessive.

“Go look under my bed,” he said, putting his hands behind his head.

Max got to her feet from the floor somewhat hesitantly. “It’s not something weird or gross, is it?”

“I mean, you’re weird and gross, so it’ll suit you,” he smirked.

“I know you can’t see me, but I’m flipping you the bird,” she retorted.

“It’s not weird or gross, Max. I promise.” He gave her a pout and crossed his fingers. She snorted. “Okay...”

He heard her walk across the hall into his bedroom, scrabbling as she

looked...

“Holy SHIT!” she yelled, delighted, her voice muffled. She pulled something out from beneath his bed, scraping it along the floor. She scampered back into the living room.

“Holy shi— Holy hell!” she yelled happily. “Where did you get this? How?”

Billy smirked, crossing his arms. He’d gotten her a snowboard. He had noticed her shuffling her feet down the snowy sidewalk in a depressed sort of way whenever they went anywhere together, obviously missing her skateboard. He’d asked Steve about snowboards, where he could get one— And Steve had produced one from his own garage, one his parents had gotten him six Christmases ago but he’d only used a handful of times. He’d tried to pay for it, but Steve had insisted he take it, shrugging. He told Billy it was only taking up space and that Max would like it ten times more than he did. He kept this fact to himself. Neil hated charity. He said it was a sign of weakness. He made something up instead.

“I bought it second hand off a guy who wasn’t using it anymore. Sorry for the scuffs. Should still work fine, though,” he said casually. “There’s a big hill by the Waterford side of town, you could try using it there.”

“ *Thank you* , Billy!” Max exclaimed. He couldn’t see her, but he’d known her long enough to know that her cheeks were ruby red. Like him, she was unused to gifts, and receiving them made her uncomfortable. He heard her putting the snowboard on the floor. There was a swish of fabric and suddenly someone pounced onto the couch. Tentatively, unsure, he felt Max’s arms wrap themselves around him, burying her head into his neck.

“This means a lot to me,” she said quietly.

He patted her awkwardly on the back, unused to physical affection like this. He wanted to thank her for her thoughtful little gift, but genuine thanks were an alien and uncomfortable thing to him.

“The car isn’t stupid,” he said instead, ruffling her hair.

Just as quickly as she had come, she was gone, bounding off to her room to wait for turkey dinner and to call Lucas and the rest of her friends on their radios. As she left the room, she felt his Dad' stony eyes looking his way. He'd probably heard the commotion and come to see what was going on. Billy picked up the little Matchbox Corvette and ignored him. Eventually, Neil stepped away. Unlike Max, he had nobody to call. He felt too awkward to call Steve, or Robin, or Nancy, and it was far too early to give Harley a call (not to mention the long distance fees his Dad would harp about if he did). So he sat in the living room and listened to Susan and his Dad having a small, quiet argument in the kitchen.

A little while later he was saved from his depressing and lonely thoughts by the ringing of the telephone. He heard his Dad answer it impatiently.

"Hey, it's that Steve kid," Neil announced from the kitchen. "What he's doing calling on Christmas Day, I don't know what... Fuckin' weirdo..."

"Yeah, okay. I'll get it in my room," Billy called back sarcastically, ignoring the needling gaze he felt thrown his way. He made his way cautiously to his bedroom and slumped on the bed, picking up his phone. He heard his dad's breath cut off. Apparently he didn't feel like listening in today.

"Hey," Billy greeted.

"Whew, your Dad does *not* like me at all," Steve's voice laughed, somewhat nervously.

"He doesn't like anybody," Billy said derisively.

"As long as I'm not the only one," Steve chuckled a little.

Billy said nothing, waiting for Steve to get to the point. He heard him clearing his throat on the other end of the line.

"Hey, listen, if you're not doing anything tonight, my parents are going to this Christmas ball thing they do every year and I was

wondering if you'd like to come out for a little party? I invited Robin and Nancy, it'll just be the four of us... Maybe we'll drink or watch something? I dunno...Oh! And I got you a gift, so you better come out, because I have to give to you!" he said enthusiastically. "It's mandatory, actually. I dunno if you knew that."

"Mandatory, huh?" Billy snorted.

"Yeah, it's major paperwork if you don't show up," Steve laughed, a little awkwardly.

"Well, I guess I have no choice then...," Billy said, a small smile breaking out across his face despite himself. "Fair warning, though, I didn't get you or the girls anything."

"Oh, that's fine, dude," Steve said. "It doesn't matter... Oh, hey! How did Max like her snowboard?"

"She loved it. I can't see her, obviously, but she actually hugged me."

"Oh, awesome! Yeah, she'll get more use out of it than me... I sucked at it. I sucked at surfing too, the couple times my parents took me on vacation. Fell right off."

"I'll have to take you surfing sometime, I can teach you. There's a trick to it," Billy said. his heart jolted in surprise and dismay as he heard himself make this promise. Where had that come from? Sometimes he hated Steve. He had a way about him that made you so comfortable you agreed to shit you would never have suggested in your right mind.

"I'll hold you to that," he chuckled. "But— Tonight, maybe around 7?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

"Okay, Cool! I'll just come and get you when I go get the girls. See you then!"

"See you," Billy repeated. He heard the line go dead. He replaced the phone in the cradle.

He drummed his fingers on his leg. He cracked his neck.He let out a breath of air, fluttering his bangs.

He stood up abruptly, going to Max's door and knocking.

"What?" she yelled.

"It's me," he announced.

She opened the door.

"What's up?"

"Do you have any comics I can have?"

Billy paid no attention to his turkey dinner, though he absentmindedly noted that it was really good. Susan's cooking was pretty much always good. It had to be, since his Dad didn't believe in learning how to do it. Otherwise, they would've all starved. Billy stood and slowly added an extra helping to his plate. As he sat back down, he asked Max the time.

"It's five, chill," Max said. He bit his tongue, forking some potatoes.

"What, are you going somewhere, son?" Neil asked, his voice dipping into dangerous territory, a threat humming below the surface of his casual tone.

"Yeah. Steve is having a little get together. He's picking me up at seven," Billy explained, trying to stay calm. His Dad was trying to provoke him, and he wouldn't let him.

"On Christmas Day? Doesn't Steve have something better to do?"

Billy didn't miss the implied insult.

"His parents go to a dance thing every year, so he's free," Billy said. *Don't explode... don't explode... don't explode...*

He heard Max stop chewing.

“Well, I think that’s very nice of him to invite you,” Susan said, standing up suddenly, the sound of plates clinking together as she began tidying.

“I just think it’s a little funny he’s running off to hang out with his friends on Christmas Day, don’t you, Susan?” Neil asked, chewing something.

“Oh, I’m sure we’ll be fine here, Neil, don’t you think?”

He heard the sink start. Susan began vigorously scrubbing a dish.

“You know, I’ve heard of this Steve kid— Harrington is his last name, isn’t it?”

Billy ate his potatoes.He felt his Dad’s boot kick him underneath the table, a warning shot.

“Yeah,” Billy said, swallowing, doing his best to keep his fury in check.

“Harrington... Seems his Dad owns a couple of dealerships, doesn’t he?”

The angry tirade that immediately came to Billy about his father being bitter and jealous came up like vomit, but he stopped it in his throat. He swallowed thickly, his jaw clenched tightly.

“Just one,” he said, desperately trying to keep the emotion from his voice. He wouldn’t rise to the bait.

“Hm. Well, Susan, seems like we’re not good enough for Billy anymore...,” Neil said, his voice in the uncomfortable valley between fury and calm.

“Oh, Neil...,” Susan muttered, giving a half-hearted laugh. “Steve has been good to Billy...”

“I can’t fathom why,” Neil said. Billy heard the creak of the chair as his Dad leaned back. “It makes me a little suspicious. I wonder what Steve gets out of it... Us being so poor, and all...”

Billy closed his eyes for a moment to check himself.

“Two girls are gonna be there too,” Billy said, shrugging.

Neil laughed, a strangely hollow sound despite its attempt at being warm. He clapped Billy soundly on the back.

“There we go. There’s the truth.”

Billy kept it to himself that one of the girls was Steve’s ex and the other was a lesbian. His father didn’t need to know that. As long as he backed off, he would pretend like he was off to his usual prowling ways. It was one of the only ways that Neil would leave him alone. As long as his son was off doing manly things like cruising for tail and banging chicks, it was alright. Friendship? That was sissy stuff.

“Doesn’t seem like Steve is the kind of guy who wants chicks though, huh?” Neil added, seemingly not satisfied with the fact he hadn’t gotten a rise out of Billy.

Billy had a choice to make. He could defend Steve, leap up and hit Neil for talking bad about the only people who’d bothered to care for him since the Mind Flayer incident, get into a fight with his Dad, get punched, locked in his bedroom, and not get to see his friends. Or, he could stay silent, take the abuse, and get to go out.

Feeling sick and cowardly, he chose to stay silent.

He finished his food and got up to go to the bathroom. When he closed the door, his hands were shaking uncontrollably.

Steve was piled onto the sofa, his head curled into his chest, leaning against the brown plaid, his right arm reaching up, his left hanging off onto the carpet. Robin was sitting on his torso. Nancy had one of his legs draped over her shoulders, and his other leg rested on Billy’s lap at the other end. The air was slowly being compressed out of his lungs, but he felt too lazy to goad Robin into moving. He was slightly tipsy and smiling at the T.V. on the other side of the room, which was playing *The Grinch*.

“God, this shit’s so heart warming. This whole movie is like... I

dunno, man," Robin said, her eyes wide and staring, taking a swig from a bottle of wine without looking away from the screen. From where he was, Steve could see the reflection of the Grinch's heart growing three sizes in her glassy eyes.

Steve coughed.

"Okay," he wheezed. "You gotta get up. My lungs are collapsing..."

Robin stood and Steve sat up, swinging his leg around Nancy's head, who swatted him, making a face. Robin sat back down and he laid on her lap, stretching out his legs so both of his stocking feet were braced against the arm of the couch at the other end, his calves resting on Billy.

"Jesus, Steve, do you have to lie down?" Nancy snorted, half annoyed and half amused.

"Yeah," he said, closing his eyes. Robin put the bottle of wine to his lips, miming feeding him like a baby, and he drank. She passed the bottle to Nancy. She took a long drink.

"We're out," she sighed, scooping Steve by the calves and pushing upward like he were a drawbridge.

"Uhhhhahhhh," Steve exclaimed, laughing as his knees were suddenly compressed into his chest. He plopped his feet back down as Nancy strode across the room.He took one of his stocking feet and poked Billy's thigh with it.

"You good?" he asked.

"M'fine," Billy said, shrugging. He seemed quiet and subdued, even more so than when Steve had first started to hang out with him. Something seemed to be chewing at him, and whatever it was, it seemed to be making quite a meal.

"Oh!" Steve yelled, calling out to Nancy who was fishing around in the wine cellar in the next room. "Presents! We gotta do presents!"

"Oh yeah," she said, coming back into the room with two bottles of red. She sat cross-legged in front of the coffee table, her back to the

credits rolling on the T.V., putting one of the bottles on the glass surface beside the small pile of gifts that had been placed there. There were three neat bags with bows, three little square things wrapped in what looked like newsprint, three pr ofessionally wrapped gifts, and a plastic bag from Walgreens.

“By the way, Billy, I just love your wrapping paper,” Robin snorted, reaching out and giving him an affectionate push.

He smirked. “Yeah, I’m tellin’ you, it was really hard. Took me hours.”

“Who wants to go first?” Nancy asked, opening a bottle with a grunt.

“Open mine first, Nancy. You can pass them out,” Billy shrugged.

“Okay!” she smiled, reaching for the plastic bag. She pulled out three comic books.

“So. I didn’t buy you guys gifts...” – Robin burst out laughing– “But I, uh... Picked a comic that suited you guys. *She-Hulk* is for Nancy, cause she’s a lawyer by day and sometimes she turns into a badass... You know, shooting crazed lunatics with a gun, beating up hellbeasts, that kinda thing...”

Nancy laughed, looking the comic over, her eyes flicking up to Billy, who was explaining the plot of the character with a little difficulty, leading Steve to believe that Max might have had a hand in helping him with his gifts.

“Uh, *Wonder Woman* is for Robin cause she’s a— like a kick ass chick from an island that has no guys on it and that just kinda sounds like Robin’s dream...”

Robin threw her head back and cackled, pausing from trying to wrangle Steve’s hair into her scrunchie, flipping him the bird. She took the *Wonder Woman* comic from Nancy, putting it on the side table.

“And *Spider-Man* is for Steve cause he’s a hyper nerd,” Billy finished, shrugging.

“Hey!” Steve exclaimed, digging his heel teasingly into Billy’s thigh. Nancy and Robin snorted with laughter. She put his comic over on the table.

“Okay,” Nancy said, passing Billy the bottle of wine. “Me next!”

Nancy gave Steve a watch strap, something he’d mentioned to her in passing that he needed. When he opened it, he felt a small pang in his gut. He really had missed her. She was beautiful, and so smart, and more ambitious than he would ever be. She got Robin a stationary set, and she accepted the gift with a red glow on her face. She’d been mailing a lot of letters lately, and every single one of them had been addressed to a certain Harley in California. To Billy, she gave a pair of nice dark gloves, who accepted the present with the grace of someone extremely unused to receiving gifts. He thanked her, and then seemed to want to fade into the couch. Steve thought it was a little strange that he had loved to be the centre of attention in the span of time he’d known him, but gifts embarrassed him.

Robin gave each of them horribly gaudy novelty t-shirts. His read: “ *DUMB AND ADORABLE* ” with a shitty cartoon dog. Nancy’s read “ *I’M WITH STUPID* ,” an arrow pointing in every direction except up.

Billy opened his, and shook out the t-shirt.

“What does it say?” he asked.

Steve read it and choked.

“It says: “ *I SHAVED MY BALLS FOR THIS* ?” Robin said, snorting.

A grin split across Billy’s face and he let out a snicker, yanking off his shirt and chucking it across the room. He pulled the t-shirt over his head.

“Perfect,” Robin cackled. “It suits you so well!”

Steve sat up finally, his hair a mess, sticking up at odd angles from Robin’s ministrations. He reached for the small packages that were his gifts, handing one first to Robin.

“Here,” he said, smiling.

She opened it and giggled. He had gotten her a small bracelet, engraved. She read it, the inscription swirling along the band. It was the secret code they had deciphered that had gotten them into the mess during the summer, and ultimately what had solidified their friendship into what it was. He could tell she was touched. She punched his arm.

“Hey, this is really nice,” she smiled, putting it on.

Nancy opened hers. Steve was a little embarrassed about her gift. He had been browsing K-Mart the week before, depressed, thinking about how he’d be spending this Christmas single and listening to *Last Christmas* by Wham! lamenting to him from the white popcorn ceiling. Then he’d seen it, a pretty necklace, a small circle medallion on the end of a silver chain imprinted with a rose. It wasn’t overly expensive, but it had certainly been more money than he had meant to spend on his ex-girlfriend. He watched her eyes light up in surprise and that sad, pitying way she always looked at him and he looked down at his hands. He knew they weren’t destined to be lovers like he’d thought, but he wanted her to know she had been the agent which had changed his life for the better. He would always love her, in his way.

He handed Billy his gift.

He watched as Billy’s fingers worked methodically at the wrapping, holding it in his lap like the box itself was going to break if he grasped it too hard. He pulled off the bow slowly and opened the box.

Inside was a small cushion, and set into the cushion was a single earring, a square crystal stud set into gold fixings. Billy ran his finger over it, picking it up gingerly out of the box.Steve nudged him.

“An earring like Bender, hey?” he laughed. A strange expression had gone over Billy’s face. He blinked a few times, a small smile quaking in the corners of his mouth, his eyebrows furrowed a little as if what he was feeling in his hand wasn’t real.

“Aw!” Robin called happily, seeing the crystal in Billy’s fingers. Then she got up, dragging Nancy with her by the arms, going over to the

tall wall of his Dad's old records, looking for something to put on.Steve licked his lips.

"Here, I can take out your earring if you want and put that one in," he offered.

Billy turned his head to Steve, his mouth opening a little.

"Uh," he said, sounding simultaneously thrilled and extremely uncomfortable. "Okay..."

Steve reached forward and gently undid the metal hoop in his left ear, placing the hoop in his palm, and taking the crystal stud. He tried to slide it in his earlobe but missed a few times, laughing.

"Sorry!" he apologized. Billy moved his head closer, sweeping his hair away from his ear, tilting his jaw so that Steve could get a better angle. Steve tried again. It felt odd to be this close to Billy – Billy wasn't in the habit of letting anyone that close to him on a casual basis. The closest he had ever seen anyone to him physically were girls whose tongues were halfway down his throat at parties. Steve flicked his eyes across his cheeks, looking at all the little details of his face. Billy's jaw was outlined against his strong neck. He had wide cheekbones, and though the light in the room was dim, Steve was able to marvel again at how long his eyelashes were. They fluttered gently against his cheeks as he blinked, patiently waiting for Steve to put the earring in his ear. He could smell a whiff of cologne— was it *Aramis* that he smelt?— and as he reached forward to slide the earring into his ear his hand brushed against his cheek, which was warm and covered in the beginnings of stubble.

He slid the earring into the lobe of his ear, taking the fastener and screwing it gently on the back, making sure it wasn't too tight. He lowered his hands into his lap, his body turned toward him. Billy took a hand and fingered the earring.

"I hope I didn't put it on too tight," Steve said.

"It's fine," said Billy, spinning the earring. He let his hand fall. He turned his head and Steve looked at him. Maybe it was the wine talking, but had Billy's lips *always* looked like that? No wonder the

girls had gone bananas over him. Washboard abs, fluttering eyelashes, those pink lips, and that arrogant smirk? Steve had had no chance against that kind of competition.

Nancy and Robin had put on a record and were dancing together, some early 60s tune from when his Dad had been young and restless. They were laughing, sharing wine, doing a dosey-do. Steve got up abruptly to join them, suddenly aware that he was crowding Billy a little too much. It probably wouldn't do to get in his face, since he obviously wasn't used to getting gifts.

He didn't want to make it a big deal if it would make him uncomfortable.

"Bye, Nance!" Steve called as Nancy shut the back door of the BMW, waving to them as she walked toward the garage. He waited, watching her unlock the garage door and go inside. Satisfied, he shifted gears and drove toward Cherry Oak drive. Beside him, Billy was smoking a cigarette. He seemed to be in a very good mood, having been able to shake off that melancholy furrow in his brow that seemed to have taken up permanent residence on his face in the last few months. He was tapping his hand to the rhythm of the music playing over the car speakers. Sick of Christmas music, they'd popped in a cassette, a mix tape that Steve had made the summer before. David Bowie sang to them about the pitfalls of Modern Love as Steve drove off into the night.

They passed through the neighbourhoods around the Wheeler's place, driving by Lucas', Dustin's... Almost every house was covered in sparkling lights. Reds, greens, and whites twinkled at them cheerily from all sides. In the couple of days since the parade, they had gotten a couple inches of snow, and the frigid temperatures that had fallen had kept it crisp and white. Above them, the sky was crystal clear, and navy blue. The stars and the moon winked down brightly on the town from above, silvery and white.

"Christmas lights look nice," Steve informed Billy.

"Oh yeah?" he asked, a little smirk quirking in the corner of his mouth.

“Yeah. Lots of people go nuts for Christmas lights in this neighbourhood.”

“Wish I could see em’,” Billy said, shrugging a little. Steve knew he was trying to play it cool, but he could tell it bothered him. They drove through the downtown which was almost deserted at this hour, a few people walking from warm apartments and staggering home from bars.

“Hey, I know it’s like three in the morning but... Do you wanna go for a drive?” Steve asked, on a whim. “ I dunno. I’m just kinda wired.” He had sobered up in the last three hours and felt strangely energized. Billy looked over at him and nodded.

“Yeah, alright,” he said, leaning back and yawning.

“Where do you wanna go?” Steve asked.

“Anywhere,” Billy said, looking over at him. On his face was a tiny, genuine smile. Steve felt a grin slowly breaking out across his own. Steve picked a random direction and drove in it.

They enjoyed the music, the warm car. Steve enjoyed the lights. Billy smoked a few cigarettes. They chatted lightly and shared a few laughs. Around four in the morning, Steve finally wound his way back toward Cherry Oak, turning onto the street and bringing the BMW to a halt, its tires crunching in the icy snow on the pavement. Billy went to open the door but Steve reached out and stopped him, putting his hand briefly on Billy’s thigh. Steve had another gift to give Billy, but he’d been a little unsure about it. It was really stupid, and he hadn’t wanted to embarass Billy in front of the girls. In the hour that they’d been driving around aimlessly, he’d resolved that he’d give it to him anyway, even if it was really dumb.

“Wait a sec, Billy.”

Billy turned his head, his hand moving away from the handle.

“What’s up?”

Steve rummaged in the inside of his coat.

“I, uh... I actually have one more gift to give you, but it’s kinda dumb so I didn’t wanna give it to you in front of the girls,” Steve explained, pulling out the small gift from the inside pocket of his coat. He took Billy’s hand and laid it in his palm, closing his fingers over it.

“Guess,” Steve grinned.

Billy’s brow furrowed as he turned the object in his hand, using one of his fingers to feel the details.

“It’s a keychain,” he muttered. “But...”

He trailed off, recognition coming onto his face. He turned to Steve.

“Did you get me a keychain of Woodstock?” Billy asked him, a small bemused smile on his face.

“Yeah! To go with your Snoopy,” Steve grinned. “Snoopy needs his sidekick.”

Billy turned the bright yellow Woodstock the bird around and around in his hand, his head bent. He opened and closed his mouth a few times. Then, he lifted his head, his eyes wide and open, his brows knitted together ever so slightly, a soft smile on his face.

“Thanks, Steve,” he said, a tiny laugh in his voice, as though he’d been genuinely touched by this stupid little present. The way Billy said his name made his heart beat faster, warmth flooding through his entire body. Steve was elated.

“You’re welcome,” he replied, smiling a little smile.

Billy shoved his hand in his pocket and pulled out his keys. He painstakingly added Woodstock to his key ring, the little bird joining Snoopy, hanging beside him. They *were* an inseparable pair, after all.

“Snoopy was my Mom’s keychain,” Billy said quietly, looking down at his hands as they worked at his keys.

Steve thought he might be too bold, but he asked anyway.

“Is your Mom back in L.A.?”

"I dunno," Billy said softly. "She left and never came back."

Steve stared at Snoopy in Billy's hand. The black paint had almost completely worn off of his expression and his ears.

"Well," Steve said, trying to lighten the mood. "At least he's not alone on that key ring anymore."

"Yeah," Billy agreed, putting his keys in his coat pocket and looking at Steve with an expression that was hard to place. "At least he isn't alone."

8. "Goody Two Shoes" – Adam Ant (1982)

New Years Eve, 1985

Steve was drunk on champagne and the world was beautiful.

It was cold, but he was bundled up in a thick coat, a blanket he'd taken from his house wrapped around his shoulders. Beside him was Robin, Nancy, and Billy. They were each lying side-by-side in the middle of the Hawkins High School football field, waiting for midnight to strike and the yearly fireworks display to explode across the sky above their heads. They weren't the only ones who had chosen this spot; a few people he recognized and a few he didn't scattered about the field, talking excitedly. Above their heads, the sky was incredibly clear.

"Five minutes!" Nancy announced, flicking a lighter near her watch so she could check the time.

Steve hummed happily, wrapped in his blanket in the snow, grinning foolishly up into the stars. Beside him, he felt Billy shift slightly, elbowing him gently.

"Here," he said, coughing a little, blowing smoke into the sky.

Steve took the joint from him carefully, inhaling long and holding it in his lungs, sucking in the freezing air and finally exhaling when he felt like his lungs would burst. The world gradually became diamonds before his eyes, the glassy stars twinkling. He handed the joint to Robin, on his other side, and she took it. She and Nancy were bundled into a thick blanket together. He looked to his left, where Billy was lounging, his eyes closed, a small smile on his face. Normally he'd be bitching about how cold it was, but the champagne and weed seemed to have helped mellow him out a bit. His hands were shoved into the pockets of a black canvas coat, his head covered in the hat Steve had given him at the parade. He was sitting directly in the snow and Steve felt stupid for not offering his blanket sooner.

Steve flung the blanket open, tapping Billy on the arm.

“Here, bad boy, get on the blanket,” he said, his words moving pleasantly like molasses on his tongue.

“Mm,” Billy grunted, shuffling over onto the huge comforter. Steve sat up slightly and reached over him, pulling the side of the blanket over his shoulders and shuffling close.

“There,” he said, lying back down. “That’s better…”

Steve cleared his throat, his eyes pleasantly heavy. He was shoulder to shoulder with Billy, the heavy blanket wrapped around them, the snow beneath insulating them and keeping them warm. Time slid and wove through his mind as he looked over at Billy, watching his dirty blonde curls sway in the cold night breeze.

“One minute!” Nancy announced. Steve startled, grinning, inching closer to Billy and gathering the blankets closer.

“You ready, big guy?” he asked Billy, grinning, just as a big group of people in the football field started to count.

“NINE!” Steve joined in, watching as a smile broke out across Billy’s face.

“EIGHT!” Billy hollered.

“SEVEN! SIX! FIVE! FOUR! THREE! TWO! ONE!”

The football field erupted with cheering, whistling, and hollering.

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

A firework whistled upwards above their heads and exploded as people all around them sang, kissed, danced, and cheered. As colours popped and fizzed above their heads, Steve leaned over and kissed Robin, then leaned over and kissed Nancy too. He turned to Billy.

“Happy New Year!” he yelled at him.

He leaned down and kissed him smartly, right on the lips, pulling away and lying back down, laughing, the weed and the champagne making the fireworks look beautiful and bright. Billy’s head flung to

the side in surprise as Steve settled back down, but he was quickly overtaken by Robin and Nancy, who had leapt up, dancing, and swooped down to peck him on either side of his cheeks. Billy laughed, swatting them away playfully as they danced away. Steve beamed as he watched Nancy and Robin dance in the snow. He stood up, leaning over and grabbing Billy's hands, yanking him to his feet.

"Come on!" he urged, as the crowds of people around them broke into a gusty chorus of *Auld Lang Syne* .

Steve swung Billy back and forth, the girls joining hands with them, swaying in a tight, drunk circle, bellowing the half-remembered words of the song. Billy was grinning from ear to ear, his eyes closed against the exploding light in the sky above their heads, the reds and blues tinting his face as they sparkled above him. His hair swayed under his hat in the cold air, his toothy grin wide and sweet.

"You're stunning!" Steve bellowed at him, putting his face near. He didn't really know what the fuck he was saying— his thoughts had become immediate things that didn't have time to live in his head before he expressed them... But he didn't care. Billy did look stunning under the beautiful exploding colours in the sky, his smile brighter than any of them. He thought he deserved to know. Maybe Billy was too fucked up to hear him, or maybe he didn't want to hear him, because his grin slowly softened into a smile, and he seemed to gently pull away from Steve, reaching for Robin.

Steve, whose thoughts were a mess of immediate emotions, felt hurt and confused for a few moments before his brain fizzled and he promptly forgot what he was upset about.

It obviously hadn't been that important.

New Year's Day, 1986

Steve walked arm in arm with Billy on the sidewalk, his free hand holding a rope attached to a plastic sled that bounced along behind. Far ahead of them, Robin and Nancy were walking side by side, chatting, taking turns dragging a wooden toboggan that Robin had dug out from the barn at her place. Up ahead of them, Max was

clutching his old snowboard under her arm, Lucas, Dustin and Mike dragging Snow Fliers and holding discs, talking loudly.

At the rear, Steve and Billy were quiet. The thin layer of frozen snow on the sidewalk crunched beneath their feet as they walked, the brisk January wind biting at their faces. Steve glanced at Billy. His cheeks were rosy, his hair fluttering underneath the hat he had given him. It seemed like it might be the only hat he owned. He was wearing a thicker coat today, a blue bomber jacket and a pair of faded blue jeans. His hands were stuffed into the pockets, his head hunched against the wind. He was happy to note that he was walking around pretty easily now.

“Hey— How’s your chest doing?” Steve asked, nudging him. “Doesn’t seem like it’s hurting you as bad anymore.”

Billy shrugged nonchalantly. “It’s tender but the skin isn’t gonna rip anymore. It’s mostly healed up I think.”

“That’s good!” Steve said, smiling at the sidewalk ahead. He licked his lips. He knew that the Upside Down left scars that went beyond physical ones, and he wondered how Billy was handling it. He wanted to believe that he was okay, but… Steve suffered from nightmares after every awful encounter with that disgusting dark place. He couldn’t imagine having lived in it and been taken over by it like Billy and Will had. He knew Billy probably thought talking about how he was doing in any way other than physical was uncomfortable and weak, but… He needed to ask, needed to know, on the off chance that Billy wanted to talk about it but didn’t know how to bring it up.

“How are *you* ?” Steve asked. He wasn’t sure if Billy would want to talk, but… He wanted to try.

“What d’you mean?” Billy asked cautiously.

“I just mean… How are you doing other than your guts? You know… Everything else?”

“Why?”

"'Cause I care about you, stupid," Steve chuckled. "I'm your friend and stuff."

"Who said we were friends and stuff?" Billy asked, a grin on his face.

"Oh, shut up," Steve snorted. "I'll lead you into traffic and leave you there."

" *Would* you?" Billy begged, his tone hopefully sarcastic.

"Alright, so obviously you're not doing great, considering you want me to push you into traffic," Steve nodded, his eyes crinkling in humour.

" *I'll* push you into traffic," Billy said, nudging Steve back, a devilish smirk on his face.

"You're avoiding the question!" Steve yelled, smiling, shoving back.

"You'll be avoiding cars soon!"

"Oh my God," Steve exclaimed, exasperated, a big smile on his face.

"Yeah, you called?" Billy asked, his voice flirtatiously low, turning his head to give Steve a smirk.

Steve rolled his eyes. "Trying to talk to you is like pulling fucking teeth."

Billy chortled, turning his head back to face the girls, who hadn't noticed their brief shoving war in the slightest. They walked in silence for a while, still smiling to themselves. Billy lit a cigarette, smoking it slowly. Then he spoke up.

"I'm okay," he said quietly.

Steve turned his head to look at him. His expression was guarded, but not totally closed.

"Yeah?" he asked, nudging him.

"Yeah," Billy said, nudging him back. He paused.

“I, uh... I don’t sleep all that good,” Billy said, his voice stilted and uncomfortable. He swallowed heavily, flicking the cigarette butt to the ground. “I keep... I keep seeing things. Again.”

Billy lit another smoke.

Steve let out a little breath. He knew exactly what he was talking about.

“That happened to me too,” Steve said simply. He could see distress breaking out across Billy’s face after he spoke, and rushed to correct himself.

“But what I saw was nothing compared to this summer,” he said, blinking. “I... It’s probably worse for you, but like... I do get it.”

Billy closed his eyes, a smouldering cigarette hanging off his lips.

“Yeah,” Billy said roughly, shrugging, looking down.

They walked for a while toward the Waterford side of town, lagging behind Nancy, Robin, and the kids. Steve wanted to say something, but he couldn’t figure out what. Billy’s face was expressionless, like he was lost in thought. Below their feet the sidewalk slowly turned to gravel where the road twisted outside of town.

Up ahead, the kids shouted and started to run, pounding their way through the snow across a vacant field. The field was owned by a farmer named Joe Fletcher, and in the spring and summer it boasted tall stalks of corn and leafy green potato plants crowned in small white flowers. The top of the field rose up into the sky and around the bottom edge of the field, near the roadside, a winding river swerved around it and under the road. In the wintertime, the long slope of the field became Hawkins’ best sledding spot. The field was already populated by a few families, kids screaming as they sped down the hill, parents calling after them. Max ran ahead of the group up the hill, eager to try her snowboard. Lucas, Dustin and Mike ran after her, dragging their sleds. Steve and Billy stepped into the knee-deep snow. Steve led Billy to the side, away from the path of the kids flying down in sleds and began to climb the hill. Ahead of them, Nancy and Robin broke into a jog, giggling, sending snow flying as

they made their way to the top,

“Have you ever gone sledding?” Steve asked Billy as they climbed.

“No,” Billy snorted. “Remember? California.”

“Well, I dunno if you went sledding last year or something,” Steve shrugged, smiling. “It’s fun. I promise. I promise you fun.”

“As long as you promise,” Billy said wryly, turning his head a little toward Steve.

“Come on, you slowpokes!” Robin called from the top of the slope. “Let’s go already!”

Steve laughed and sped up, pulling Billy alongside him. They got to the top of the hill and a rush of giddy excitement exploded in his chest as he looked down on the slope. This had been the best and only sledding spot in Hawkins for generations. He, his Dad, and even his grandfather all had fond memories of whizzing down this exact hill as kids.

Robin was clamouring in on the old toboggan sled behind Nancy, both of them grinning foolishly.

“Oh!” she called out, lifting her camera out of her bag. “Steve! Take a picture of us!”

He took the camera, putting it to his eye.

Robin and Nancy pushed themselves with their hands, the sled crunching slowly on the shiny, packed snow, and then...

They shot down the hill. Steve clicked a picture, and laughed as he watched them careen down the hillside, shredding through the snow at the bottom. They made it to the edge of the field and stood up, waving. Steve looked over to where Max, Dustin, Lucas, and Mike were sledding. Max had finally gotten the snowboard attached to her feet, and was being helped by Lucas to stand up.

“Has Max gone yet?” Billy asked.

“Nope, she’s just about to,” Steve told him, watching. She got into position and Lucas gave her a big push. She bent her knees, sliding quickly, turning the board. Like an expert, she shredded back and forth across the hill, making a perfect arc across the bottom of the field, coming to a stop and falling back on her butt.

“Holy shit! She’s a natural,” Steve exclaimed, chuckling. “She just went down that hill like she’s been snowboarding her whole life.”

“California,” Billy repeated, a grin on his face. Steve could tell that he was quite proud of her.

Robin and Nancy came panting up beside them, and Steve handed Robin her camera back.

“Okay,” she wheezed. “Your guys’ turn.”

Steve arranged the sled, and Robin led Billy to it. He sat down and scooched across the plastic, getting settled, his feet out on either side. Steve sat behind him, wrapping his legs around Billy’s waist, bracing them with his hands.

“Hey cowboy,” he said teasingly in a sultry Southern accent, putting his chin momentarily on Billy’s shoulder.

“Howdy,” Billy greeted, pretending to tip his hat.

Steve laughed and pushed them along with his feet.

“Okay, let’s go...,” Steve grinned. Billy helped him push, walking his boots along the crunching snow, coming over the crest of the hill.

They picked up momentum quickly, their combined body weight sending them flying down the hill at an unholy speed. Billy’s legs lifted and Steve wrapped his arms around his shoulders. His stomach flipped and he let out a whoop of excitement as they hurtled down the slope toward the long end of the field. The sled began to turn sideways, and Steve laughed uncontrollably as the powdery snow at the bottom flew up into their faces. Then, suddenly, they were flung out of the sled, arms and legs twisted together, rolling. Eventually they came to a stop. Steve was face up, lying in the snow, one of his legs bent, the other splayed out, his arms out above him. On top of

him was Billy, his belly stretched crookedly across his chest. He was facedown in the snow, his body vibrating strangely. It was only when Billy lifted his head, snow sitting on his eyelashes and his glowing red cheeks, that Steve realized he was laughing.

He wasn't just chuckling low the way he always did. He was cackling with laughter, giggling with mirth, wheezing, his eyes squeezed shut. Steve, who had started to laugh on the way down, fell into a loud fit of guffaws, flinging his head back into the snow. He heard a crunch beside him and a click. He looked up. Robin was standing over them, smiling happily.

Billy's gloved hand held Steve's in a vice grip as he was led up the hill, running, snow in his hair, his jeans damp, his cheeks burning. He couldn't stop laughing. He felt like he was on drugs, like he was an uncorked bottle of champagne. Try as he might, he couldn't stop. Just when he thought he had it under control, he heard Steve snicker and it started again. His guts ached, his face feeling like stretched rubber. Cold tears welled in his eyes.

"You wanna go again?" Steve asked him, barely able to speak for laughing.

"Yeah," Billy wheezed.

This time, Steve got in front. Robin's hand led him down onto the sled, and he sat behind Steve, wrapping his legs around Steve's waist, bracing them against the snow. He felt Steve inching them along, then—

They picked up speed, and Billy wrapped his arms tightly around Steve's chest, putting his face into the back of his neck. It wasn't like he needed to see where they were going. He closed his eyes and laughed, enjoying the ride, the thrill of the descent flipping in his belly, the skidding of the sled along the cold, packed snow. With his nose pressed against Steve's body he smelled the cool plastic of Steve's coat, the piercing warm snap of his scarf, the flowery hint of good old Farrah Fawcett. He felt them pitch sideways, heard Steve's boot try to stop them, grinding through the snow...

They were flung from the sled. The momentum sent them flying together, Billy holding on tight to Steve's chest. They rolled, the motion jerking his grasp free. When they finally stopped, Billy felt the weight of Steve on top of him, slightly diagonal, his head buried in the snow beside Billy's ear. Billy bent a knee, wheezing with breathless laughter, one of Steve's legs between his, the other splayed out in the snow. Steve turned his head and Billy felt his warm breath on the side of his face as he giggled.

Billy took a hand and patted the top of Steve's head, his face red, his eyes squeezed shut in uncontrollable wheezing. Steve slowly extracted himself from Billy, lifting himself up before flinging himself down beside him, his face turned to his. Billy turned his face to him, crying with laughter.

"It hurts," Billy wheezed, clutching his stomach.

Steve curled up into a ball, rolling back and forth in the snow on his back, unable to form words.

Billy finally managed to stop laughing as they made their way up Steve's driveway. He was hunched slightly, one arm clutching his stomach, the other dutifully wrapped around Steve's. He had actually managed to overwork the newly healed wound in his gut, to the point where he felt the familiar ache of it return. Normally, this would have been a reason for gravity, but he felt so unbelievably silly and inconsolable that he didn't seem to be able to care. He hadn't laughed hard enough to cry since... He couldn't remember.

"Haven't laughed like that since I was a little girl," Billy sniffed dramatically, theatrically wiping his eyes.

Steve snorted, giving him a gentle elbow in the gut.

He was left alone for a moment as Steve arranged the sleds in the garage. Then he was lead into the house, kicking off his boots. They had driven Robin home, and Nancy had gone home with Mike. Susan was planning to pick up Max at Lucas' house later on that day. He hadn't wanted to go home yet, since he didn't get out much, and Steve had offered to hang out for a little while.

Steve led him upstairs.

“Where are we goin?” Billy asked, confused.

“To my room, get you some dry clothes,” Steve told him. They walked down a carpeted hall and went through a door. Billy knew immediately this was Steve’s bedroom. It smelled different than the rest of the house, a faint flowery tinge mixed with a cologne hanging softly in the space. He was led across a plush carpet and sat onto the edge of a very soft bed. Billy heard the noise of Steve opening a set of drawers, rummaging through them. A pair of soft sweatpants and a sweatshirt landed on Billy’s lap.

Billy felt suddenly very self-conscious about his body. He had never before felt this way in his entire life, always working very hard to achieve looks that wouldn’t need any second thought. Now... His chest and belly was a roadmap of scars, uneven flesh... He knew it was ugly, that his looks were ruined... And he suddenly realized he didn’t want Steve to see them.

He opened his mouth to say so when Steve spoke.

“I’m gonna go in the spare room and change, I’ll give you a few minutes.”

Billy closed his mouth, grateful that he hadn’t had to admit to Steve that he was embarrassed and self conscious about the way he looked.

He heard Steve leave and got to work changing. The clothes were dry and soft, and seemed warm somehow. He had no idea what was on them, but he didn’t care. They were cozy and comfortable.He changed, putting his clothes at the foot of the bed. Carefully, he shimmied on top of Steve’s bedspread and lay back, putting his head on his pillow, gazing up sightlessly into the ceiling. He wondered what his bedroom looked like. Was it painted? Wallpapered? Did it have trophies from when he was a kid, maybe posters of babes, or his favourite movie? He had been so obsessed with what he’d been going through, he realized he didn’t exactly know a lot about Steve. His bed at home was very lumpy, but he’d not had the money to replace it. Steve’s bed, like most of the shit he owned, was new and very well made. He wasn’t used to it.

Billy paused, listening at the door. Nobody was coming. He lifted the sweatshirt and put it over his nose, breathing in. It smelled like Steve, that oddly comforting scent that made him breathe easier whenever he was near.

He pulled his face out of the shirt quickly as he heard someone knock. He internally berated himself as he told Steve to come in. He was acting like a total fucking sissy... Smelling his clothes? What the fuck was wrong with him? He steeled his thoughts. He had closed the door on those feelings for a reason. He was in a small town now, and he knew Steve would never like him that way. He was only hurting himself by pretending.

He heard Steve chuckle as he came into the room.

“Tired?” he asked.

Billy shrugged.

“I never been in here,” Billy said. Spending so much time outdoors, in the cold, had left him feeling sleepy. “Your room, I mean.”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “I guess not.”

“What’s it look like?”

Billy felt the mattress dip as Steve sat down near him on the bed.

“Well,” he began. “It’s wallpapered, white, with green lines making like a… What do they call it? I don’t remember but, the green lines make little squares. There’s posters— You know Christie Brinkley?”

“Of course I know Christie Brinkley,” Billy smiled.

“Yeah, I dunno why I even asked,” Steve laughed. “I got a poster of her up, on the wall by the dresser.”

“I got Shawna Grant up on my wall,” Billy said.

“Oh, yeah, I know her… She died, didn’t she? Last year?”

“Yeah,” Billy said quietly, thinking of the lights pooling out from the Hawkins Middle School gym. “She uh… She killed herself.”

“Damn…,” Steve said softly. An uncomfortable pause lapsed between them.

“Uh... My furniture is dark wood, a couple little things from when I was a kid that I just didn’t get rid of yet, like this weird metal plane that my mom got when she was decorating my room when I was like five,” Steve continued, in a rush. “I got pictures of the team from basketball up, a picture of my grandpa Dickie... I guess that’s it. Oh— My carpet is green, and the comforter you’re hogging is white.”

“It smells different,” Billy told him, his eyes closed.

“Like... Different bad?”

“No,” Billy said, a ghost of a smile on his lips. “Just different. Kinda smells like a girl lives here too.”

“Hey, it’s a small price to pay for having hair this good,” Steve snorted.

“Mm,” Billy said. He felt so comfortable... This bed was stupid fucking soft. He felt like he was on a cloud. He didn’t usually sleep well at home. He never had, and what had happened to him didn’t help. Like he’d admitted to Steve earlier, he tended to see things again in his sleep. His Dad was also a constant concern, the reason he had never slept very well even before everything changed. He felt Steve get up and click a dial, the sounds of a television issuing quietly through the room. He heard Bob Barker tell someone they were getting a new car through the sleepy haze in his brain.

“Move over,” Steve grumbled. He felt two hands shoving him across the top of the comforter until he was on the left side of the bed. The bed rocked as Steve climbed up beside him, shoulder to shoulder. Billy tried to listen to the *Price is Right* , if only because he thought maybe it was rude to fall asleep on someone’s bed like this. He heard a woman guessing the numbers.

Then he was asleep.

Steve looked over as the credits rolled, and blinked. Billy's eyes were closed, his lips parted ever so slightly, his brow furrowed gently, his cheeks rosy and pink. He was fast asleep. His dirty blonde curls fanned out on the pillow, his bangs flicked upward, showing off his forehead. One of his hands was splayed above his head, the other on his belly. Steve sat up carefully and looked at him, laying out on his bed, breathing softly, wearing a grey pair of sweatpants and a blue sweatshirt. He looked smaller somehow when he was asleep and relaxed, like his cocky grins and confident stances made him seem larger than life when he was awake. Steve was surprised that Billy had let himself fall asleep beside him. Steve was tired and didn't care — but Billy seemed like the kind of person who'd be concerned about that kinda thing.

Then again... Maybe he wasn't. He seemed pretty secure in his ability to seduce chicks wherever he went. Accidentally falling asleep next to a guy wasn't gonna ruin his track record. Steve stared at his eyelashes and wondered not for the first time how a guy could have such pretty eyes. His eyelashes were longer than Nancy and Robin's, for Christ's sake! It was almost unfair. Billy flared his nostrils in his sleep and his brow furrowed more deeply, his mouth closing. Steve looked around his bedroom. The light had faded to darkness outside, and the room was lit only by the TV up on the dresser, casting a flickering bluish sheen on the room as the commercials ran. By the light of an ad for a new 1986 Datsun, Steve caught Billy squeezing his eyes shut like he was in pain.

Alarmed, he turned around on the bed and stared at him, leaning on his knees and hands. He hadn't been asleep for that long... Could he really be dreaming? Billy's hands moved slowly to his sides, his fingers clenching into fists.

"Mmm," he moaned lightly, his lips pursed shut.

"Billy?"

Billy didn't respond. He lay still for a few moments before he jerked roughly, like he'd been hit by something. He moaned again, his

mouth opening, his eyes squeezed shut.

“Hey, Billy! Hey!”

Steve reached out a hand to touch his shoulder, but before he could, Billy’s hand shot out and grabbed his wrist. Steve watched in terrified amazement as Billy’s eyes opened, his pupils darting over and staring at him. They seemed to look right through Steve, right into his bones, the television light reflecting off their glassy surface. Steve swallowed hard.

“Billy?” he whispered.

Behind him, the TV flickered, blinking on and off. Steve spun around, staring as a cereal ad flared in and out of darkness. Then, suddenly, it went back to normal, a vapid looking young man eating a bowl of Cheerios with a shiny smile. Billy’s hand fell from Steve’s wrist and his eyes closed, his body slumping like he had been dropped.

Steve let out a quick, fearful breath.

“Billy? Billy!”

He put his hands on his shoulders and shook him, desperate for him to wake up. Whatever had just happened... It didn’t bode well. Billy jumped awake, looking scared and confused, lifting his hand up in self defence over his face. He stared past his hand and his mind seemed to take a few seconds to catch up that he was in an unfamiliar room, with Steve.

“Wh—what?” Billy muttered thickly, slowly lowering his hand and blinking.

“You... You feel asleep,” Steve said, trying to sound calm.

“Oh,” Billy said, swallowing. “I— I thought I saw... Never mind.”

Steve licked his lips.

“You looked like you were dreaming or something,” Steve said, relief slowly washing over him as Billy seemed to be back to normal.

“Dreaming,” Billy repeated, still sounding confused. “Yeah... I... I was dreaming...”

Steve swallowed. “Well,” he said, trying to sound normal. “I’ll give you a lift home, if you’re tired.”

“Yeah,” Billy said, sounding more awake. He quickly sat up on the bed, getting to his feet.

Steve opened his mouth, the strange incident on his tongue... Then snapped it shut again.

January 16th, 1986

Steve woke up, looking at the ceiling, and yawned. He sat up, stretching, scratching his chest absently, his hair sticking up at the back like a rooster. He sleepily stood and walked over to his closet, opening it up and pulling a random sweatshirt from the hanger. He pulled it over his head and rubbed his face with the heels of his palm, making his way out into the upstairs hall and downstairs. The house was quiet, his Mom and Dad obviously long gone. As he walked into the kitchen, he saw a card and a present in blue wrapping paper sitting on the counter for him.

It was Steve’s 19th birthday, and he was alone.

He opened the present first, blinking down at a new watch. His shoulders fell a little as he sighed. His Mom and Dad had been giving him watches for almost three years now, ones he didn’t exactly like but were certainly expensive. He was still wearing the one Nancy had gotten him, held to his wrist by the strap she had given to him not two weeks ago at Christmas. He put the watch aside and read the card. It was some goofy sentiment, something store-bought. Inside, his Mom had signed for both herself and his Dad. He put the card down and scratched his head, looking around. He made himself some breakfast and was just getting started on his coffee when his Mom ran through the door like a whirling dervish, grabbing something from her seemingly endless craft supply closet, kissing him on the cheek with hurried well-wishes, and whirled out again.

“There’s a cake in the fridge for you!” she called to him as the door slammed. He waved to her, but she was already gone. He stood at the top of the carpeted stairs leading down to the landing and the asymmetric glass of the chandelier above his head clinked in the breeze generated from the closing door. The house suddenly felt very empty, emptier than it usually did. He could hear the refrigerator motor humming softly, the wind against the windows. It was flurrying a little outside, like it always did on his birthday. He turned on his heel and walked back to the kitchen. He looked over to the sink and let out a soft snort of laughter. Last week he’d been doing a few dishes when he’d noticed a small orange stain on the backsplash, a bit of pumpkin pie filling he must have missed during the cleanup of the ill-fated pie he’d tried to make. He opened the fridge door and saw his cake sitting prettily on the shelf, homemade and just as professional looking as everything homemade his mother created. It was white with blue icing. His mother’s flawless cursive had written the words *‘Happy Birthday Steven!*’ in red across the top. Steve sighed and closed the fridge door, looking up at the kitchen clock ticking on the wall. It was ten in the morning.

Robin and Nancy were at school. He didn’t want to bother Billy, since he tended to sleep late. He’d maybe call him—

The phone rang.

Steve jumped, the phone sounding like a klaxon in the silent house. He slid across the kitchen floor over to the cradle hanging on the wall and picked it up, putting his arm against the plaster above his head.

“Hello?”

“ *Happy birthday, shithead* ,” said Billy.

“Hey, you remembered! I know thinking is hard for you so I’m glad you managed,” he chuckled back.

“ *And I’m surprised you made it to nineteen with how many times someone’s kicked your ass* ,” Billy retorted, chucking.

“I guess it was just meant to be,” Steve said.

“ *Guess so.* ”

“Hey, uh... Nobody is around today, did you wanna do something?” Steve asked, shifting his feet and taking his hand off the plaster, rubbing the back of his neck.

“ *No, I’m actually super busy* ,” Billy deadpanned.

“Oh, sorry I asked. I know you have a lot of important business matters to attend to.”

“ *Yeah* ,” Billy snorted. “ *I’m already late for my lie-in-bed-and-do-nothing appointment, which’ll really cut into my jacking off time.* ”

“Jesus,” Steve said, rolling his eyes. “Well, if you can squeeze me into your tight schedule, would you wanna catch a movie or something? Go bowling?”

“ *Bowling?* ” Billy repeated incredulously.

“Yeah, you know— throw a ball down a lane and hit pins?”

“ *I know what bowling is, dumbass* ,” Billy said. “ *I’m just worried you might throw your back out tryin’ to hit the pins.* ”

“Oh, come on! You’re older than me by a few months. If I’m old, then you’re dead already,” Steve guffawed.

“ *I mean, second time’s the charm* ,” Billy said.

Steve blanched. “Oh, you know what I mean,” he said hastily, annoyed. Billy laughed loudly on the other end of the line. “Do you want to go bowling or not?” Steve asked, his eyes pointed to the ceiling, a small smirk working on his face despite himself.

“ *Yeah, yeah... I’ll go with you to the bowling alley to make sure you don’t hurt yourself* .”

“I’m gonna get all strikes and then you’ll be sorry,” Steve said, his grin breaking free.

“ *Jokes on you, Harrington, I’m a bowling champ,* ” Billy bragged.

“Yeah right. Pick you up in like an hour?”

“ *What time is it?* ”

“Around ten.”

“ *Alright. How’s this: I’ll make sure you got a nice silver haired girlfriend before the day’s out, as a birthday gift,* ” Billy promised, snickering.

“Jesus, you’re disgusting… I’ll see you in an hour?”

“ *Yeah. See you then.* ”

Steve lined up the shot, his rented bowling shoes sliding a little on the polished wood. He readjusted himself and knelt, throwing his arm back and sliding forward, letting the ball roll from his grasp. He watched as it rolled in an arc, off centre, going for the centre pins… And then continued rolling and clunked into the gutter.

“Goddammit,” he grunted, straightening up. He slammed the button to reset the pins and turned around to look at Billy, who was sprawled in one of the plastic chairs attached to the scoring desk, smoking, tapping his cigarette into the ashtray. He sipped at a beer, giving him an arrogant smirk, his black canvas coat draped on the back of his chair. The owner of this particular bowling alley was a cranky old man named Fred who had been serving Steve beer since he was fourteen. Much like many of the older entertainment establishments in Hawkins, the word ‘liquor licence’ was something fake made up by bureaucrats that none of them exactly felt the need to follow. Fred was a good old guy, even if he was gruff and constantly displeased.

Billy was wearing a black t-shirt with a faded Budweiser logo on it, tucked into a pair of rough looking blue jeans. He looked pretty casual, more casual than he usually was, his hair a little bit messier. Steve had no idea if this was a good thing or a bad thing. He’d seemed so meticulous about his appearance before, and as the months passed he had slowly stopped really trying. Steve didn’t care what clothes he wore, of course, but he did care only insofar as he was worried this meant Billy wasn’t feeling like himself. He stored

this piece of information in the back of his mind for later, and traipsed down to the scoring desks.

“That sounded like a big fat gutter ball, my friend,” Billy sighed, smiling, handing him the beer. Steve took it from him and took a swig.

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve sighed. “Your turn, bowling champ.”

He watched as Billy stood up, stretching. He gestured for the beer and Steve handed it to him. He polished it off in a few gulps, wiped his mouth, and put it down on the scoring desk.

“Hey!” Steve protested.

“I’ll get the next one,” Billy said, putting up a complacent hand as his foot reached out to tap the stair that stepped up onto the bowling platform. He stepped up.

“Alright, old man, direct me,” he said, holding out his arms.

Steve snorted and rolled his eyes, taking him by the hand and leading him to where he was supposed to stand. He stepped back, crossing his arms.

“Balls are to your right,” Steve told him.

“You should get that checked out, doesn’t seem normal,” Billy said, grinning as his hands searched for the queue and located a ball. He reached out a foot and located where the gutters began, adjusting his stance so he was roughly in the middle of the lane. “Alright. You ready for this?”

“Oh yeah. How else am I gonna woo myself a silver lady if I can’t brag about your skills?” Steve laughed.

“They’re gonna be all over you,” Billy smirked as he pulled his arm back. He slid forward and let go. The ball left his hands and thumped a little hard on the wood floor, spiralling onward toward the pins. He was a little off— but his path stayed moderately true and he managed to pick off a few pins on the very end of the left.

“Wow, four pins. I’ve never seen anybody so talented at bowling in all my life,” Steve mocked.

“Hey, I got four pins blind and you got none seeing, so I’d say I’m doin’ pretty okay, shitbird,” Billy said, reaching out to grab another ball. “How many balls do you get?”

“Well, two usually, unless you’re a freak or there’s an accident,” Steve snickered.

“Hey— The three ball community is a respectable group of people who don’t deserve your bullying, Harrington. They got more juice than *your* candy ass, that’s for sure.”

“Speaking of candy ass— Why d’you gotta wiggle yours like that when you’re lining up your shots?” Steve asked, cackling, watching Billy measure the distance, slightly bent, his ass doing a little dance as he swayed.

“This candy ass is where I keep all my bowling talent,” Billy said, kneeling and letting a ball roll. It was slower this time, hitting the wood floor more gently. It skirted across the lane and took out one pin, this time on the other side.

“Wow, one pin. No wonder your ass looks like that if that’s where you keep your bowling talent,” Steve snorted. “One more.”

Billy selected a ball, rolling it in his hands.

“This is the lucky one. The pay off. This one will show ya why I’m the king of this fuckin’ bowling alley,” he said, grinning a little too widely to be taken at all serious.

Steve giggled a little.

“Alright, show me.”

Billy took a little longer trying to figure out his shot this time. He spread his legs, shuffling them back and forth, trying to gauge which direction the ball might roll. He bent slightly, his ass in the air, and Steve resisted the extremely tempting urge to go up and give it a swift kick. He managed to resist, seeing as he still wanted to be Billy’s

friend when they left the bowling alley. Billy wound his elbow back and slid, bowling a slight curve along the track. It weaved a little toward the left, then curved nicely to the right— hitting the centre pin and sending pins flying. He still had two left standing, but it was still better than any score Steve had managed so far.

“Wow, only two left. Your ass has been redeemed.”

“My shot always hits the target,” Billy grinned saucily up at him, his tongue sliding over his teeth as he slid his hand along the plastic queue and pushed the button to clear the pins. Steve rolled his eyes, a grin pulling the corners of his lips. He helped Billy down and back into his chair.

"Well,” Steve said, leaning over the score desk and pulling the pencil and score marker toward him, marking their scores. “All this talk of shots and balls has somehow made me thirsty. You want another beer?”

“Yeah,” Billy said, reaching back for his coat and his wallet.

“Don’t worry about it, dude. Dad slipped me like a hundred bucks last week for my birthday to do what I wanted with.”

“Ooo,” Billy mocked lightly, getting out his wallet. He pulled a ten from it and offered it to Steve. “Whatever, consider this beer my birthday gift.”

“Nah,” Steve grinned, refusing to take it. “I don’t accept your gift.”

“Accept my gift, dill weed,” Billy grumbled, smiling, reaching out and trying to catch Steve’s arm.

“No!” Steve laughed, dodging Billy’s swiping hands, backing away.

“Fuck you, dummy, take my money,” Billy chortled, pretending to be mad at him but failing. He waved the bill between his forefingers. “Go on! Take it!”

“Nope!”

Billy threw the bill at him, but it only fluttered to the ground as Steve

backed away and laughed all the way to the bar. When he came back with two cold beers, he picked the tenner off the ground and shoved it back in Billy's wallet.

Steve and Billy stood just inside of the Hawk Theatre, side by side, a few feet from the ticket booth. It was one o'clock in the afternoon, the foyer of the theatre almost completely deserted except for a few old folks tottering toward the concessions stand and a haggard looking mom with a brood of kids leaving a movie. Steve looked over the movie selections and sighed, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Well... I'm not gonna lie to you, pickings are slim," Steve chuckled. "Though, if I had to pick, I think *Rainbow Brite and the Star Stealers* is definitely something you'd enjoy."

Billy hooked his thumb into the loop of his jeans. "You're rainbow bright," Billy muttered, smirking.

Steve ignored him.

"Oh, wait! Even better— The Ewok movie's still playing!"

"The fuck is an Ewok?" Billy asked.

"You know... The little hairy guys from *Star Wars* ?" Steve said. He prodded Billy on the shoulder, making little high pitched barking noises.

"No, Steve, I don't know the hairy guys from Star Wars," Billy said, shaking his head.

"Haven't you seen *Star Wars* ?"

"I saw the first one when it came out, but I was like ten, dude."

"This is what I get for hangin' around Dustin...," Steve muttered.

"Is there anything on the menu that don't got rainbow unicorns or furry little men?"

"Rainbow Brite isn't a unicorn, she's a doll— Jesus, don't be so

ignorant," Steve said, pretending to be offended.

"Oh, forgive me," Billy said sardonically.

"I dunno about furry little men, but I'm pretty sure Rocky IV doesn't have Rainbow Brite in it," Steve said. "But I haven't seen it yet, so no guarantees."

"I guess we'll have to take our chances..."

They went to the ticket booth and bought their tickets. Steve gave the owner a thin smile as he was given a death glare, who clearly remembered the incident where he had graffitied the marquee.

"Your tickets," the man said sourly, handing them over. "And be sure that you don't get the urge to mark all over everything, hm?"

"Yup, no worries!" Steve said, turning quickly and marching Billy over to the concessions.

"Alright, I'm getting a giant popcorn," Steve said, looking over his shoulder at the owner, who raised his eyebrows at him and turned away to do something else. "Wanna share?"

"Yeah," Billy said.

"A pop?"

" *Pop?* " Billy repeated, snorting. "What?"

"Ye—yeah? Like... Coca-Cola? Mountain Dew? Tab?"

Billy snorted. "What are ya, a fuckin' Canadian?"

"Well, what d'you call it, then?" Steve demanded.

"Soda, like a normal person!"

"Okay, alright," Steve mocked. "Mister cool California here and his soda... What d'you wanna drink, already? I'm just gonna get us a bucket and we can share..."

"Coke," Billy said.

“They don’t have Coke, they have Pepsi.”

“Fuckin’ Indiana! Can’t get shit here,” Billy grumbled, a little smile on his face.

Steve yanked him forward, rolling his eyes.

“Hey,” he called out to the man behind the concession stand. He looked like he was pushing about ninety years old. “Uh, extra large popcorn, extra butter, and an extra large Pepsi, please.”

“Alrighty, son,” the old man wheezed pleasantly. He waddled over to the popcorn machine, and Steve watched in patient agony as his shaking hands scooped the popcorn and pushed the buttons to pour the drink.

“Shouldn’t you two be in school?” the man asked them lightly, his reedy voice lilting in laughter.

“Aw, no, we’re graduated, sir,” Steve called.

“Wha?”

“We’re graduated!” he called, a little louder, as the man rubbed his ear.

“Ahh,” the old man said, nodding, gathering the drink.

Steve almost jumped behind the counter to help his trembling hands as he tried to carry the large Pepsi and oversized popcorn bag. Thankfully, he made it without incident, and Steve paid, smiling at him gratefully.

“Thanks, buddy,” he said.

“Yeh, you two have fun,” the man muttered, giving a little wave and a very wrinkly little smile.

He handed Billy the popcorn bag to hold and led him toward the theatre, clutching the Pepsi and taking a drink.

“Why is everyone in Hawkins a hundred years old?” Billy asked him.

“Seriously. I’ve never seen so many old people in one place in my entire life. Do they do tourist ads or some shit?”

Billy bent down, pretending to walk with a cane.

“Come retire in Hawkins, home of bowling and doing nothing,” Billy joked, imitating a wizened old man. “Bingo on Tuesdays.”

“Aw, darn!” Steve exclaimed dramatically. “That’s what I had planned for us next! You know, my Mom always warned me about becoming friends with the wrong crowd, and I didn’t listen... Now I’m friends with a bingo hater...”

“You’re fuckin’ doomed, buddy,” Billy sighed.

“I know...”

The theatre was mostly empty when Steve looked up into the seats, only an old man sleeping at the back who had probably been there for the previous showing and who nobody had bothered to move, and a distressingly familiar young couple making out wildly a few rows down from the back. Steve made a face and took Billy to the fifth row from the bottom, sitting them in the middle. As Billy settled, taking off his coat, Steve half turned in his seat and peered through the dim lighting in the theatre, trying to make out who the young lovers were. He saw a flash of fiery red hair butting into a head of black hair.

“Huh,” Steve muttered in Billy’s ear, scratching his upper lip. “I think I see a couple young kids sitting up in the seats who should definitely be at school right now...”

“Jesus, Steve,” Billy laughed, shovelling buttered popcorn in his mouth. “What’re you gonna do, give ‘em detention? Like you never skipped...”

Steve cleared his throat.

“Yeah, um... I think you know them. One of them you once described as, and I quote, ‘ *small, redhead, bit of a bitch.* ’”

Billy stopped chewing, his mouth hanging open, a fistful of popcorn

stopping midair on its way to his face.

“Oh yeah?” he asked, after a few moments, finally closing his mouth.

“Yep,” Steve chuckled. “I don’t think they noticed us, they’re uh... Well, they’ve been sucking face since we got in here.”

Billy’s expression turned devilish. He half turned in his seat.

“Direct my hand, Steve,” he muttered, holding out his handful of popcorn, his tongue flicking over his lips in glee.

Steve grinned at him, and took his wrist, lining up his trajectory.

“Kay, about there,” he whispered in Billy’s ear.

Billy wound back his arm and let loose a popcorn volley. The popped kernels exploded across the seats behind them, some of them landing on Max and Lucas, who pulled away, flipping their heads around furiously. When they saw it was Steve and Billy, Lucas’ eyes widened in shock and Max’s mouth gaped open, glaring, her face turning so red that Steve could see it even in the dim light of the theatre.

“What’re you two doin’ here?” Steve called up at them teasingly, Billy folding his hands over the back of the theatre seat beside him. “Isn’t it a school day?”

“What’re *you two* doing here?” Max demanded. “Isn’t it a *work day* , Steve?”

“Unlike you two shitbirds, Steve’s got the day off,” Billy scolded lightly.

“Oh, whatever, Billy! Like you never skipped!”

“To make out with my boyfriend? Yeah, haven’t done that!” Billy called.

“We didn’t skip just to make out!” Lucas protested. “It’s— There was a free period, and it was lunch—“

“What class you guys skippin’?” Steve asked them as the preview

bumper started to play on the big screen.

“Math?” Lucas called back, at the same time that Max yelled “We have a free period!”

She looked over at him and shook her head, giving him a dirty look and smacking him on the arm.

“What?!” Lucas demanded.

“Yeah, yeah, just keep it PG back there, would you? I could barely hear Steve over the sound of you two suckin’ face,” Billy called, turning around in his seat, a shit-eating grin plastered on his lips.

“Oh my God…,” Max groaned.

“Are we really gonna stay here?” Steve heard Lucas mutter under his breath. “It’s not like we paid… We could go somewhere else… It’s super weird to be in here with your brother… And Steve, I mean… Come on…”

“Yes, oh my God, let’s get outta here,” Max whispered back furiously.

Steve grinned and watched as Max yanked Lucas out of his seat by his hand, swinging her backpack onto her shoulder. They pounded down the theatre steps and stopped at the end of the row where Billy and Steve were sitting.

“You know what?” Max said bitingly, smiling. “We just realized we have a big math test and we should go.”

“Yup. Big test,” Lucas nodded, without much conviction.

“So we’ll leave you two to your nice romantic movie date and be on our way,” Max continued, turning on her heel and dragging Lucas.

“Okay, bye!” Steve yelled after them, giggling.

“Good luck on that test!” Billy called as the theatre door slammed shut.

Billy nudged Steve and they both dissolved into gleeful laughter. Billy leaned down in his seat and took a mouthful of popcorn, devouring it messily, propping his boots up on the empty armrests of the seat before him.

“Man, the guy you bought the tickets from seemed like a nasty old bastard,” Billy observed through a mouthful of popcorn, reaching out beside him and taking the Pepsi, gulping down a few sips.

“Uh... Yeah... Actually, usually he’s a pretty nice guy, he just doesn’t like me...”

“How come?”

“Well,” Steve began, grabbing a handful of popcorn from the bag in Billy’s hand and popping it in his mouth, “Uh... When me and Nancy first started dating I thought she cheated on me with Jonathan Byers, so... I spray painted ‘ *NANCY THE SLUT* ’ all over the theatre sign...”

“Damn, Steve, that’s cold,” Billy said, raising his eyebrows and swallowing his popcorn. “And she still dated you after that?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, laughing shortly. “I know... Surprised me too...”

“What’d she do to you?”

“Uh... She confronted me... I was hanging in the alley beside here, with Carol and Tommy, and uh... Jonathan was with her. Him and I had a fight.”

“He wasn’t datin’ her,” Billy said. “How come he fought you?”

“I uh... I said some shit to him,” Steve said quietly, picking at a hole that was wearing in his jeans, his mouth feeling very dry. “Told him his family was screwed up, told him he was screwed up... Called him a fuck up and a queer...”

Billy stilled.

Steve let out a derisive snort. “I mean, Jesus Christ, his brother was missing, and— Whatever. I dunno. It was a long time ago.”

“Who won?”

“Huh?”

“Who won the fight?” Billy repeated.

Steve licked his lips and let out a little laugh. “Well. Jonathan did, actually.”

Billy turned his head toward him, a strange expression on his face.

“You really can’t win fights, can you?”

Steve sighed heavily. “You know... I’m finally starting to accept that fact...”

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“After that, something sorta snapped. Tommy called Nancy a slut and I just— I guess I was mad at myself. Total hypocrite, right? I literally spray painted it on a wall like an hour before, but... I dunno. Doing it and then watching someone else do it... I guess it just made me realize how fuckin’ dumb I sounded. I mean— Nancy’s best friend Barb was missing, Jonathan’s brother was missing too... Of course they’d want to talk... And now that I know what was going on, I feel actually worse about it sometimes, you know?”

He shrugged.

“Anyways... I called Tommy an asshole, and he was tryin’ to fight me, and— I don’t know. I left. I was a coward, I guess. Already got my ass beat once that day... I went into town and I saw the owner of this place cleaning up the spray paint, so... I offered to help clean it. Took me like two hours… I guess he hasn’t totally forgiven me,” Steve said, laughing a little. The feature presentation bumper bloomed across the big screen, the lights dimming.

Billy was quiet beside him, chewing slowly on his popcorn, his face very still. They were the only ones in the theatre other than the gently snoring man at the back. He didn’t really care about the movie, and from the way Billy’s face was turned toward him, seeming mesmerized, he didn’t either.

“I smashed his camera, you know. Jonathan’s,” Steve continued. “He was out looking for his brother, and he must have ended up near my backyard. I dunno why, but he took pictures of us. It was creepy. I know he knew he shouldn’t have done it. I did buy him a new one, but... I sort of don’t regret smashing the camera... Is that bad?”

“You’re askin’ the wrong person," Billy mumbled, blinking. He chewed some popcorn and swallowed.

“For a bit there I didn’t regret kicking your ass,” he said baldly, after a few moments. “I thought you were bein’ creepy with Max.”

“What made you apologize?” Steve asked him, genuinely curious. He watched as Billy’s tongue flicked across his bottom lip.

“She eventually lied to me and said it was ‘cause Will Byers had to go to the hospital and she’d snuck out to be with her friends. She said you were babysittin’ them,” he said, shrugging.

Steve felt like he wasn’t getting the whole picture, but he knew there was no point in digging. Billy only talked when he wanted to talk, and prodding him for answers wouldn’t work. He had clearly reached the limit of the amount of soul searching he was willing to do in one sitting, turning away toward the movie and slumping arrogantly in his seat again, loudly munching on popcorn. Steve let out a little sigh, turning to the movie.

“So, what’s happening?” Billy asked him, gesturing with a hand to the screen.

“Well, if you’ll believe it, Rocky is fighting a guy...”

Billy sat at Mrs. Harrington’s kitchen table and listened to Steve as he talked on the phone, sucking in a cigarette. Steve was making sympathetic noises as he listened.

“Yeah, she already did, she’s home sick with it too,” Steve said kindly. “Don’t worry about it, Robin, I understand. Seriously— Don’t worry. I don’t want your cold and I want you to get better.”

Steve paused.

“No worries, Rob,” Steve said. “Feel better. Yep— It’s okay. See you soon. Bye.”

He hung up the phone.

“Well,” he sighed. “Looks like it’s just us tonight. Nancy and Robin have the plague.”

“Yeah, Max had that last week. S’goin’ around," Billy shrugged. The week before he’d woken up to Max coughing up a storm in the next room. The cold had put her on her ass for two days.

“And my mom and dad aren’t gonna be back til way later,” Steve informed him, coming to sit at the table with him. “So...”

Billy tilted his head, hearing the edge of bitterness on the corners of Steve’s words. Over the past few months it seemed like Steve’s parents were never home, and while for Billy this would be paradise, maybe for Steve it was different. Maybe if your parents cared about you the way parents were supposed to, at least when you were a kid, something changed if they disappeared when you were older. He didn’t know much about it— his own Mom had long disappeared when he was just a kid— but Steve’s parents were still there, still fluttering in and out of his life at their leisure, sometimes there and sometimes not. Steve had told him earlier that day that he had been the guy that used to host the craziest parties, the guy that got everyone into trouble. He wondered if Steve’s parents had ever noticed. Billy didn’t know what to say to make Steve feel better, so instead he stretched, yawned, and kicked out his sock foot, hitting Steve on the leg.

Steve started. “What?” he demanded. Billy smirked.

“Nothin,’” Billy said, shrugging, tapping his cigarette into the ashtray at his fingertips, knowing that ‘Nothing’ was the most infuriating and distracting answer he could possibly give. Steve fell for it, hook, line, and sinker, kicking his own sock foot out and jabbing Billy in the shin.

“What?” he demanded again.

“Nothin,’” Billy repeated, putting up his palms complacently, his forefinger clutching his half-burnt cigarette. “Was an accident.”

“Yeah right,” Steve said flatly.

“Whatever, dude, believe what you wanna believe,” Billy shrugged, leaning back in his chair and butting out his cigarette.

“Yeah, and I believe that you jabbed me in the leg on purpose,” Steve said. “You’re not that slick.”

“Oh, yeah? If you think so, why’d I do it?”

“To distract me,” Steve said.

“Well— Worked, didn’t it?” Billy grinned, running his tongue over his teeth.

Steve made a noise of distaste in his throat that didn’t sound totally genuine.

“Well, I got a cake in the fridge... You wanna have some?”

Billy shrugged. “Yeah. Okay.”

Steve got up, walking across the kitchen. Billy lit a cigarette and listened to the ambient sounds of Steve rummaging around in the cupboards, and opening a paper package.

“You know, it’s kinda sad that I’m putting the candles on my own birthday cake,” Steve joked, laughing lightly. Billy knew he was trying to make light of it, and felt a small twinge of sympathy for him. His own birthdays had been stilted awkward things that he could do without, but… Steve was warm and his parents had cared about him, at least at one time. Just because his birthdays were shit didn’t mean that Steve’s had to be.

“Oh– I’ll get you an ashtray in a sec,” he called over his shoulder.

“Oh, fuck. Sorry. I forgot,” Billy said, exhaling smoke. He wasn’t used

to living in a house that was pretty much smoke free. His Dad smoked like a chimney and Susan always had a cigarette hanging off her fingers as she wandered around the house doing chores.

“It’s cool, man,” Steve called back. He heard Steve run down to the basement and come back up. He handed Billy the ashtray, and he took it. Steve went across the kitchen and carried the cake over, sliding it onto the table and sitting down beside him. Steve let out a little sigh.

“You ever seen *Sixteen Candles* ?” Steve asked him, chuckling softly.

“No,” Billy said, tilting his head. “Seemed kinda... I dunno. Girly or somethin.’”

“Nancy made me watch it once, she loves it... Nance is super tough and super smart and all that, but she loves romantic crap. It— I mean, the movie was cheesy as hell, but…”

Steve stopped, letting out a laugh.

“So, the plot is that it’s the sixteenth birthday of the main girl in the movie, but everyone forgot it was her birthday ‘cause her big sister scheduled her wedding on that day,” Steve explained, adjusting the cake on the table. “Anyways— She has this crush on this popular guy, and he secretly has a crush on her, and some stupid shit happens in the middle, but basically it ends with her sitting with the popular guy on a table with her birthday cake and he’s all like ‘ *make a wish* ’ and she’s like ‘ *my wish already came true* ,’ and then they make out.”

“Huh,” Billy said. He felt like every nerve in his body was charged with electricity. Where the fuck was Steve going with this? He noticed that his cigarette was burning down to his fingers, untouched. He hastily tapped it in the ashtray beside him and took a long drag to soothe himself. His mouth was dry.

“I dunno…,” Steve said. “I guess it’s really lame, but I kinda feel like that girl right now…”

Billy’s eyes widened.

"'Cause it kinda feels like everyone forgot my birthday, you know?" Steve continued, the kitchen chair creaking as he shifted. "It's so pathetic, I know, and nobody *actually* forgot about my birthday, I just…"

Steve sighed and snorted softly, laughing at himself. "Whatever. It's stupid."

Billy let out a quiet breath of air, his body deflating. He felt a stab of bitter longing slicing through his heart that he knew was very dangerous, but he couldn't stop himself as he butted out his cigarette and leaned forward, folding his arms in front of him.

"I didn't forget," Billy heard himself say quietly.

Steve seemed to become very still, but it was hard to tell.

"Yeah," Steve said after a beat. "You didn't."

Billy was overwhelmed with emotion, not sure how to hide it, so he tilted his head down. The kitchen table was solid wood – Mrs. Harrington would only settle for the best, after all. He bit his lip then threw caution to the wind. He lifted himself from his chair and climbed up onto the table, crossing his legs, reaching forward tentatively and bringing the cake toward him, making room for Steve.

Steve let out an incredulous laugh. "Really?"

Billy shrugged, a little smile fighting to put itself on his lips. As Steve climbed up onto the table, he let it, the corners of his mouth quirking upward, feeling gleeful, tamping down the warning bells built deep into his heart that chimed maniacally, warning him that what he was doing would only hurt him, that he was just inviting more heartache. They seemed suddenly very faint in Mrs. Harrington's pristine kitchen, far away from the shadow of his father and his difficult life.

Billy flicked open his zippo.

"Here," he said. "I'll light the candles. Just guide me."

Steve chuckled, and shuffled near, holding the side of his hand.

Steve's palm was warm, his fingers gently calloused from the sports he had played, the schoolwork he'd written, the jobs he had done— little life stories written on his skin. Steve guided his hand over the candles on the cake, the warm flame of the zippo on his fingers. After nineteen candles all in a perfect circle, Steve pulled their hands away, and took his back. Billy flicked the zippo shut, putting it down on the table beside him.

"Well," Billy prompted. "Make a wish."

Steve hummed a little. "I never used to make wishes when I'd blow out candles at my birthday...," he laughed. "Not 'cause I think I'm too good for wishes or something, I just could never think of anything on the spot, and I'd always forget to think about it beforehand."

Billy hadn't made a wish since his mother had been in his life— at least, not until he had thrown his coin into the mall fountain last fall. He thought about the silvery qaurter sitting at the bottom of the chlorinated pool and wondered what Steve had wished for that day, if he had made a wish at all. A tender part of his heart hoped he had, and an even quieter part of his heart hoped that it would come true.

"Whatever," Billy said, shrugging. "Eatin' a little wax never killed nobody. Take your time."

Steve was quiet for a full minute.

"Okay," he said eventually. "I got one."

"What is it?" Billy asked him, smiling.

"Not telling, you know the rules," Steve said, laughing.

He leaned forward and took a deep breath. Billy felt his breath flicker on his knees as he blew out his birthday candles.

"There," Steve said quietly. He sounded like he was smiling from ear to ear.

Steve hooked his arm into Billy's and together they walked up the concrete steps toward the back door of Billy's house. At the top, on

the back porch, Billy extracted himself and stood by the door. He paused.

“Harrington?”

“Mhm?”

Billy moved with cobra-like reflexes. Suddenly, miraculously, his hand was shoved deep into Steve’s front pocket. He opened his fist against his thigh, and then his hand retreated. Steve stared at him, flabbergasted. “Wh—what?”

He shoved his hand in the pocket that Billy had just left. He felt something papery and crumpled. When he pulled it out, he saw that it was the ten dollar bill he’d tried to make Steve take.

“Take it,” Billy insisted, his hands in the pockets of his coat, stepping back toward the metal storm door at the back of the house. Steve, on the last step before the deck, looked up at him. Billy’s face was sincere, a small smile in the corner of his mouth. He looked like he felt a little awkward, insisting on his little gift, but he seemed determined to give Steve something. Steve pocketed the ten dollars, seeing how much it meant to Billy.

“Okay,” he said quietly, gratefully.

“Sorry I was the only one who could show,” Billy said, giving him a small nod.

“It's fine,” Steve shrugged. And it was. This had been the best birthday he’d had in a long, long time.

“Happy birthday,” Billy said. His voice was quiet, sincere, the rare way he spoke when he worked up the courage to be affectionate. Steve knew how hard it was for him to say something like that, say something and mean it in a tender way. He was always smirking, always cocky— and Steve even liked those parts of Billy. They were fun. But this voice was something different and something Steve felt privileged to hear. He felt, in that moment, that Billy might have begun to trust him.

They stood on the porch in silence for a few moments, unsure of

what else to say.

“Well—goodnight,” Billy smiled, his cocksure smirk back in place. Steve smiled back. He wasn’t sad Billy had retreated— just happy he had let himself be truthful and soft for a moment.

“Goodnight,” Steve said, laughing softly.

Billy went inside.

9. "Please, Please, Please, Let Me Get What I Want" – The Smiths (1984)

February 8th, 1986

It was Saturday, and like every Saturday since last September, he was roaring down the highway in Billy's Camaro, breathing in Camel smoke and listening to hard rock and Billy's deranged sense of humour.

"Nancy's mother is *not sexy* !" Steve bleated, his eyes wide.

"Yes, she is," Billy insisted, grinning. Beside him, the window was open a crack and he tapped his cigarette along its edge, the ashes flying out behind them.

"That's... She's Nancy's *mom* !"

"Yeah, and she's totally smokin' hot," Billy said, taking a drag of his cigarette.

"I can't... That's... I had *sex* with Nancy, I can't even... Really? *Nancy's mom?!* "

"Yeah, and you wanna know something Steve?"

"I don't, actually, but you're gonna tell me anyways..."

"I almost fucked her."

"What the fuck!" Steve gasped, choking on nothing.

"Yep. Last summer. We were gonna meet at the Glades Motel, you know the one off of route 76?"

Steve's eyes flicked over to Billy in the passenger seat, a bemused smile on his face.

"No— You know what? I'm callin' bullshit. You're jerkin' me around. I don't believe you."

Billy shrugged. “Whatever, man. Believe what you want.”

“Well— Explain then! How come I haven’t heard about this till now?”

Billy's smile faltered a little.

“Uh. Well... That’s when the Mind Flayer thing got me, that night...”

“Oh.”

Billy threw his cigarette out the window. “She told me the next day that she never showed up, too, so... I guess it was for the best.”

An awkward, somber silence reigned in the car for a few minutes.

“ *MRS. WHEELER* ?” Steve exclaimed, disgusted, smacking Billy on the chest with the back of his hand. “You’re horrible. Absolutely and utterly horrible...”

Billy shrugged. “Eh. The attraction faded, and I respect that she don’t wanna ruin her family. She shouldn’t over little old me, y’know? And listen— Sometimes you want someone experienced, right? A lot of these girls in Hawkins, you know, they’re good girls, and that’s cool, but sometimes you wanna fuck someone whose had some time under the belt.”

“I mean, I guess...,” Steve said uncomfortably. The truth was that he had kind of been a virgin when he had slept with Nancy. Sure, he’d fooled around, gotten his dick sucked, had his head between a few girl’s legs... But he had nothing on Billy, who clearly liked to have sex for shits and giggles, and often. He wondered how he was doing, being all cooped up inside and not being able to be on the prowl.

“These uh... These last few months have been hard, huh?” Steve said awkwardly.

Billy snorted derisively. “Yeah, not *hard enough* , more like...”

Steve nodded. He stopped at a red light and looked over to him.

“Who in Hawkins have you fucked, man? I gotta know...”

“I don’t kiss and tell, Harrington,” Billy said, attempting a chaste and innocent tone.

“You’re so full of shit,” Steve snorted, laughing. “ *So* full of shit. Come on– Spill.”

Billy laughed. “Uh... A few girls. There was Tina— We fucked on my first day of school. She’s pretty funny... She got a good sense of humour. We still got together sometimes when nobody else was around, you know? Uh, Rebecca Piper… And there was this chick Janelle, real cute chick, you know her?”

“Oh, yeah, I know her, she’s pretty.”

“Yeah, real fun. And there was Heather—“

“Heather Holloway?” Steve asked, intrigued, accelerating at the green light.

“Yeah. She and I actually dated for a minute there— Her Dad made her stop seeing me though, he was a real fuckin’ prick. She was lucky though, she was Daddy’s girl and he treated her like gold. Didn’t treat anybody else that great though...”

He stared into the middle distance.

“She’s funny and really smart,” he said, quietly. “Or at least… She used to be…”

Steve let out a small sigh. Everything that Billy had worked for in Hawkins had come crumbling into ruin because of the Mind Flayer. He had been out with Billy a while back, and he silently thanked his lucky stars that Billy was blind so he couldn’t see the way that some of the people avoided him, or looked at him with barely concealed hostility. It was obvious they didn’t know what happened, but somehow knew deep inside that he had something to do with the darkness and confusion that had overtaken them, poisoned them, made them awaken in a hospital weeks later with visions of a dark world lying like a predator in their subconscious. Some, like Heather’s father, hadn’t made it. Heather had been one of the lucky

ones.

He reached out and patted Billy on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry, buddy,” he said bracingly. “You’ll be back to prowling around everyone’s mom in no time.”

Billy snorted.

“Don’t tell Nancy,” he said, letting out a breath of laughter. “It’d be weird.”

“Oh,” Steve said, “Oh, there is *no way* I’m telling anybody about that. It’s too fuckin’ weird. *You’re* too fuckin’ weird. Nobody would believe me.”

“Like I said— I’m a slut.”

“Yeah, you’re somethin’ alright... Not right in the head, maybe...”

“Oh, I’m just fine in the head department, pretty boy,” Billy said.

Steve whipped his head to the side, staring at Billy like he had never seen him before.

“You’re *what now* ?” Steve asked, incredulous.

Billy was smoking and looking out the window. He looked like he had spoken before he could stop himself. Steve was amazed to see a tiny flush of pink on his cheeks, as though he hadn’t meant to speak but his big talkative mouth wouldn’t shut up.

“Oops,” Steve teased, smiling. “Someone said somethin’ they didn’t mean to... You and your *big mouth* , right?”

Billy’s face fell and his jaw clenched. “Shut the fuck up, Harrington,” he growled, angrily. Steve balked, feeling like he had whiplash.

“Dude, I’m sorry—“

“Just drop it.”

“Okay.”

They drove in tense silence for countless minutes. Steve's gut was churning. He felt a little sick. He hadn't meant to hurt Billy, not at all... He felt stupid, knowing his father had constantly derided him with that kind of teasing, and he had forgotten. He pulled over onto the side of the road, putting the car into park. He looked at Billy, who was sitting stony faced in the passenger seat.

"I'm really sorry, Billy," he said quietly, putting a hand on his knee. "I... I saw you were uncomfortable but I said it anyways, I shouldn't have."

Billy's head tilted downward, his chin on his chest, licking his lips.

"I just... My Dad says that shit to me all the time..."

"I know," Steve winced. "Honestly? I'm the one with the big mouth... It's gotten me into trouble a few times... Most recently with Russians..."

Billy snorted, lifting his head a little and turning toward Steve.

"Yeah, I can see you giving them some lip..."

"Too much... My face was fucked after that..."

"Everyone seems to be obsessed with ruining your pretty face, huh?" Billy said.

"Yep... But! As long as they don't mess with the hair... We're all good. If someone cuts my hair, it's over for me."

Steve started the engine, pulling back out onto the road. Billy opened his mouth and licked his lips.

"I accept your apology," he said, as though the words were alien in his mouth. Steve supposed they might have been— Nobody really seemed to apologize to Billy Hargrove very often. They just kinda assumed he wouldn't want or need one.

"Thank you," Steve said. "I promise to be more uh... What's the word? Oh! *Conscientious* ."

“ *Conscientious* ,” Billy repeated, smirking. “Them are some college words, right there.”

“Hey, I dated a total brain for like two years,” Steve shrugged. “It kinda rubs off on you, y’know?”

“Yeah,” Billy nodded, lighting another cigarette. He nudged Steve as he lit it, talking around it, grinning. “You’re *rubbin’ off* on me,” he said.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Okay, dude, now you’re just asking for me to make jokes!” he laughed. “That one’s on you.”

“Yeah, it’s on me,” Billy agreed, innocently enough—but the devilish smile made what he said totally filthy.

“God, why is everything you say dirty?” Steve laughed. “Like, Jesus Christ, everything you say is fuckin’ suggestive.”

“I can’t help it!” Billy chuckled, leaning forward, blowing a cloud of smoke. “I dunno. I got a dirty mind.”

“Filthy, absolutely filthy,” Steve agreed.

“Aww, you’re just some pretty rich boy. You’re not used to it, huh?” Billy teased, flicking Steve on the shoulder.

“Maybe I’m a pretty rich boy, but you’re a—‘ *Dirty white boy* !” Steve sang at Billy loudly, grinning. “ *DIIIRTY WHITE BOOOY* !”

“Oh yeah, well— ‘ *You’re a rich girl, and it’s gone too far, cause you know it don’t matter anyway* ,’” Billy sang dramatically, leaning in to Steve. “ *You can relyyyyy on the old man’s money, you can relyyyyyy on the old man’s money* !”

“Does that make me *Uptown Girl* too?” Steve asked, giggling.

“ *SHE’LL SEE I’M NOT SO TOOOUGH, JUST BECAUSE, I’M IN LOOOVE WITH AN UPTOWN GIIIIRL!* ” Billy bellowed, jabbing Steve in the ribs.

“Stop!” Steve cackled, jerking away from Billy’s finger.

Billy slammed his head back against the headrest, bellowing into the ceiling, holding his fists out in triumph. “ *MY UPTOOOOOOWN GIIIIIIIRL* !” he howled.

“Oh my God,” Steve chortled.

“What, don’t like my singing, Stevie?” Billy asked him, looking mock offended. “You got a problem with my musical talent, pretty boy?”

“No, I was just thinking about how you should take up a professional singing career,” Steve joked sardonically.

“Hey, I just might... Just wait, one day you’ll see these abs on MTV and then you’ll be sorry.”

“I wouldn’t miss your glistening abs for the world, William Hargrove,” Steve joked, his voice a mockery of wistfulness, fluttering his eyelashes briefly at Billy.

“William Hargrove,” Billy repeated, laughing a little, shaking his head. “Sounds so formal, don’t it?”

“Yeah, I mean... I kinda feel like I’m addressing a letter to someone in 1812 to let them know their girlfriend died of the bubonic plague or something,” Steve agreed.

“What’s your full name, Harrington?” Billy asked, stretching.

“It’s Steven Philip Richard Harrington,” Steve said, enunciating each word, smirking.

“Oh, Jesus,” Billy snorted. “That is pretentious as shit.”

“Yeah, it is... What’s yours?”

“William John Hargrove,” Billy shrugged. “John was my grandpa’s name. Didn’t really know him that well, he died when I was pretty young.”

“Yeah. My Dad’s Dad is named Philip and my grandpa on my mom’s side is named Richard. We call him Dickie. Actually, I think you’d like him, he’s totally batshit crazy.”

Billy laughed. “My kinda man,” he said.

Steve pulled into the drive thru of the McDonald’s on the Church Street strip and asked him if he wanted anything. Deciding on fries, Steve ordered and then went to park beside the K-Mart.

“Mm,” Steve exclaimed, licking a salty finger. “So, I asked my parents if I could have a few folks over to our cabin next weekend, and they said they were cool with it. It’s a nice little cottage on Hatchet Lake, like an hour and a half Northeast of here. I was wondering if you’d be interested?”

“Yeah, I mean, I’m not busy,” Billy shrugged, taking a sip of his Coke. “Max and Susan are going into Indianapolis for the weekend then, so...”

Billy’s tone didn’t change, but he could see that something went unsaid. The way Neil Hargrove looked at his son crawled like a spider up Steve’s back. Billy didn’t want to be home alone with his Dad for the whole weekend.

“Cool, sounds good. I’ll ask Robin and Nancy.”

They finished their fries.

“Hey, Steve,” Billy asked curiously. “Don’t you feel weird hangin’ around Nancy again? You guys dated, and I dunno... I could sorta tell last year that you really liked her...”

Steve sighed.

“Yeah, I really liked her...,” he said, his lips twisting. “I mean, call me a sap, but I think a part of me always will...”

Billy let out a small breath of laughter.

“You *are* a fuckin’ sap,” he said, and Steve felt a smile come onto his face at Billy’s tone. It was warm and affectionate, as though the fact that Steve was a sap was the most charming thing Billy had ever encountered.

“Fuckin’... Bleeding heart,” Billy smirked, leaning over and reaching

out for Steve's head, managing to catch the side, ruffling his hair. "As Max would say, ' *gag me with a spoon.* '"

"Hey, hey! Easy on the hair, bucko!" Steve exclaimed, pushing Billy's hand away.

As he fixed his hair, he continued.

"I mean... It's less weird now. It was at first. But now... I guess I see the truth. She was always gonna leave Hawkins, and I was always gonna be right here... Still in Indiana, still in the same shitty town I grew up in..."

"You don't wanna leave?" Billy asked him.

"Not yet, at least," Steve sighed. He shrugged. "I dunno. You're right that I loved her. I did. But I guess I also knew she was too smart for me and that if she stayed with me I'd probably hold her back. So—I'm okay with it. I'm just glad I can still hang around with her, she's so fuckin' smart and she's really cool."

Billy listened to him quietly, neither mocking nor offering sympathy. After a while he nodded.

"She's pretty cool," he agreed. He grinned. "But you're right. She's *way* too smart for you."

"Hey, shut up," Steve groused, grinning back. "I know I'm dumb. That's why I'm hangin' out with *your* sorry ass."

He patted Billy on the chest with the back of his hand and Billy threw a French fry at him.

"Oh, fuck off," Billy snorted.

Steve looked at him and had the sudden realization that Billy looked happy, genuinely happy. He smiled down at the french fly in his lap.

February 14th, 1986

Steve ran up the front steps of Billy's house and knocked. He waited for a few moments, the steam of his breath making clouds in the air in front of him. Finally, someone opened the door. Steve turned his head, a small smile on his face, expecting to see Billy. It fell in surprise when he saw that it was Neil who had appeared at the door. He opened the door a crack, staring at Steve will ill-concealed contempt.

"Hey– Is Billy there?" Steve asked him, keeping his voice polite.

"He's sick," Neil grunted.

"Oh," Steve said. He suddenly felt a wave of concern. "Uh, can I come in and see him for a sec?"

"No," Neil said, enunciating each word, his blue eyes startling. "He's sick. What you can do is get off my lawn so I can stop heating the neighbourhood."

"O-Okay," Steve said, backing away. "I'll come back another time. Sorry."

Neil grunted and closed the door, shutting the inside door with a slam that sent the blinds in the window swinging. Steve stood on Billy's doorstep, feeling off-kilter, his brows furrowed. Something about this was off. Something wasn't right. Billy would've called him if he was actually sick…

His feet took him back across the lawn, and he got into the front seat of his car.

"What's up?" Nancy asked him, noticing immediately something was off.

"His Dad says he's sick," Steve said, rubbing his lip with his thumb.

"Oh, that's too bad…"

"Yeah," Steve said, starting the car. He pulled around the corner, turning his head and looking at the side of the house. He bit his lip.

“Shit,” he muttered. He pulled the BMW quickly to the side of the street, coming to a sudden stop and slamming it into park. He turned off the engine, yanking the keys from the ignition. “ *Shit* .”

He got out of the car and strode across the short ditch lining the side of Billy’s house. Behind him, he heard the door open and Robin’s boots crunching in the snow. She ran up and grabbed his wrist. Nancy got out of the car and sprinted up to join them.

“What are you *doing* ?” Robin hissed.

“I’m just paying Billy a visit,” Steve murmured flatly, pulling his arm out of Robin’s grip, jogging toward the house. He climbed as quietly as he could over the low fence that lined the property, and then leaned down, creeping along the yard toward the side of the house. He tried to picture the inside in order to figure out what window was Billy’s, deciding on the window closer to the front. Coming up alongside the concrete foundation, he stood up, lifting his wrist. He was just tall enough to reach up over the wooden window frame.

He rapped smartly on the glass three times.

A few moments passed. Then the crooked blinds in the window were swept aside and Billy’s face appeared, his eyebrows furrowed. Steve felt his stomach drop into the earth. On Billy’s right eyebrow was a small cut, and his eye was purple and bruised. He rapped on the window again, more urgently this time.

Billy slid the window up, opening it all the way, and poked his head outside.

“ *It’s me* !” Steve hissed.

“ *Steve* ?” Billy hissed back, looking nervous.

“ *Yes* !”

“What are you doing here?” Billy demanded, keeping his voice low.

“Well, your Dad told me you were sick...,” Steve explained, leaning his head up as high as he could, on his tiptoes. He stared into Billy’s

bruised face urgently.

“ *Steve! He’s coming* !” Nancy called from behind the fence. He spun around. The girls were beckoning frantically to him.

“ *Shit!* Your Dad’s coming around the lawn, he’ll see me!” Steve whispered to Billy.

Billy opened and closed his mouth a few times. Then, he reached down and grabbed Steve under his armpits, yanking him bodily through the window and dumping him on the floor of his bedroom. On his way through, Steve accidentally knocked over a pile of cassette tapes and a few books and magazines. They toppled to the floor in an almighty crash, and Billy swore, slamming the window shut. Outside, the girls scampered away behind a bush, hiding themselves.

Billy stood in the middle of his room, breathing hard. On the floor, half covered in *Playboys* and a leaning tower of Pisa’s worth of cassettes, Steve let out a quiet little laugh.

“Whoops,” he said.

“Shit,” Billy muttered, kneeling down. “Can you get up and see where he is? Stay out of sight.”

Steve scampered to his feet and looked through the blinds. Neil’s back was to them, scanning the bit of fence he had jumped over. Steve felt himself go pale. He couldn’t believe how stupid he was— His footprints were right there in the snow!

“Shit, I forgot about my fucking footprints!” Steve hissed, jumping away from the window. Billy had been shoving the magazines and cassettes out of the way. He froze.

“Fuck!”

Steve chanced a look out of the window. Neil had disappeared— But the sound of the back door flinging open and the heavy footfalls of his steps in the hallway answered the question of where he had gone. Billy froze. Steve stared at him, not sure what to do.

“Under the bed,” Billy said quickly.

“What?”

Steve didn’t get a response. Suddenly, he was being pushed to the floor, Billy shoving him underneath the mattress. As Billy shoved, he was pressed against shoe boxes, forgotten pieces of paper, and a dubious looking towel. Billy only had time to straighten up as something metal clicked outside of Billy’s door and Steve saw Neil Hargrove’s boots appear at the doorway.

“Where is he?” Neil asked, his voice low and venomous.

“What?” Billy asked, sitting on the bed. “Dad, what are you talking about?”

“You know damn well what I’m talking about! Where is that skinny little faggot?”

Underneath the bed, Steve rolled his eyes, clenching his jaw.

Neil stode across the room, standing before Billy. Suddenly, Billy was pulled violently to his feet. A hollow slap rang out across the room and Steve tensed, his heart beating double time, his blood burning. He had to go out there! He couldn’t just let Billy get smacked around like this, he had to—

“Okay, fine!” Billy yelled, his voice wobbling. “Okay... He came to the window, but he left... He left... Alright, Dad? He saw you and he ran away...”

Billy slumped back down on the bed.

“Chicken shit little bastard,” Neil muttered. He paused, and Steve could tell he was leaning closer.

“Do not lie to me again,” Neil threatened softly. He turned around and strode out of the room, slamming the door behind him. From the other side, Steve heard a metal lock click into place. Silence reigned in the room. Steve let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding and shuffled sideways, slowly making his way toward the side of the bed that was open to the room. Billy got off the bed and

knelt down, his face appearing. He put a finger over his lips, hushing him. As Steve got closer Billy pawed out blindly for him and got ahold of his shirt and his belt loop. He gave them a yank, pulling Steve out. Steve scratched his nose, the dust irritating him, before standing up and putting his hands on Billy's shoulders. He looked pale and scared.

He leaned in, his lips close to Billy's ear so he could speak quietly.

"Let's get out of here," Steve murmured.

Billy's mouth opened and closed. He looked angry, terrified, and trapped. Steve blinked.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Ah… I…"

Billy seemed rooted to the spot, his eyes wide, his mouth open, his spine rigid.

Steve grabbed his shoulders.

"It isn't worth it to stay," he said quietly, his throat thick. "Billy... You said Max and Susan are visiting family for the weekend, right? They won't be back until Sunday night..."

Billy flicked his eyes down to the floor and said nothing. Steve's heart beat faster, adrenaline coursing through his entire body. Billy closed his eyes, looking pained.

"You should just go without me," he said.

"Please!," Steve urged. He licked his lips. "For God's sake, Billy! He—He hit you, your face... I... You—"

Someone was walking down the hall.

"Come on," Steve begged, his voice cracking. He felt tears welling in his eyes. He took Billy's hand, holding it tightly, dragging him toward the window. "Come on… *Please* ."

Something in Steve's voice must have gotten to him. Billy blinked his eyes several times and seemed to snap out of whatever daze he had been in. He let go of Steve's hand and strode over to the end of his bed where a duffel bag was, bringing it back over to the window. Steve let out a sigh of relief and flung the window open, taking Billy's bag and throwing it outside into the snow.

"You go first," Steve said. Billy looked up at him, shaking his head. Steve rolled his eyes.

"Go!" Steve said forcefully, pushing Billy toward the window as he heard the footsteps stopping outside of the door. Billy climbed out, sticking his legs first and then sliding down along the house. Steve was half out of the window, Billy holding onto his leg, when someone grabbed him by the arm and yanked hard. Steve let out a strangled yell as Neil grabbed him in a headlock and tried to pull him back into the room. Billy, outside, realized what was happening and grabbed onto Steve's waist, his body falling to the ground with the effort to drag Steve out of the house. He let out a yell. Steve grasped and scrabbled at Neil's iron grip. The man was breathing heavily.

" *Let go of him* !" Billy screamed from outside the window, his voice mottled in terror and fury.

Suddenly Steve felt two other sets of hands grabbing onto his legs and waist. The combined weight of Billy, Nancy, and Robin forced Steve out of Neil's grasp, his torso twisting painfully, his head cracking on the frame of the window as they fell onto the snowy yard in a heap. Steve wheezed, dazed from the blow to his head, trying to catch his breath. Nancy grabbed him under the armpit and dragged him to his feet, Robin scooping up Billy's bag and taking Billy's hand. Together they ran for their lives toward the low metal fence along the Hargrove property, jumping over it, crossing over the ditch and into the safety of the BMW.

Steve coughed and sputtered as he slid into the backseat, sideways. Billy slid in right behind, slamming the door. The girls scrambled into the front.

"Keys! Steve, *keys!* " Nancy shrieked, holding out her hand. Steve clambered for the car keys in his coat and handed them to her. She

started the car and they sped down the road, away, away. In the front seat, Robin was clutching Billy's bag to her chest, her eyes wide. In the rear view mirror Steve could see that Nancy looked wild, some kind of fury deeper than words humming along in the flat line of her lips.

Beside him, Billy was crying.

Steve felt his breath come back to him, and sat up. He looked at Billy, his forehead tingling in pain. He felt something hot slowly winding its way down his face from where he had cracked his head. Billy was staring straight ahead, an expression of hatred and bitterness so strong he was almost unrecognizable. Every dip and facet of his face seemed cast in shadow. Steve had seen this expression on Billy's handsome face once before. The Mind Flayer had wanted them dead, but somehow *this* face was worse. It sent a mixture of pity and fear so strongly through Steve that he had to resist the urge to recoil away. Tears streamed down Billy's face unbidden. His hands were twisted into fists on his knees. He was trembling.

Swallowing the urge to retreat, Steve tentatively reached out and put his hand on his shoulder. When he did, he immediately felt Billy's flesh tense to meet him, his body full of violence but desperate for tenderness.

"Billy?" Steve whispered, his voice still hoarse.

Billy turned his head, his light eyes staring in a way that unnerved Steve to his core.

"I hate him," Billy murmured.

Steve felt goosebumps travelling across his flesh.

The drive to the cabin was somber. Nancy drove the whole way, furiously silent. Nancy knew where the cabin was. She had been there herself once, a couple of summers previous. The entire way, Robin kept glancing in the rear view mirror to look at Billy, where he sat, ramrod still, his fists clenched, his jaw set. Steve sat beside him, unsure, not knowing if he should try and talk about what had

happened or ignore it. Every time he glanced at Billy, the purple bruise under his eye and the cut on his brow shocked him. He had always found Neil Hargrove to be a gruff and somewhat unpleasant kind of person, but he had never expected... Never thought...

He felt like it was wrong, somehow, that anyone could be hurting Billy like this. He felt like the ruthlessness that he had seen, the way Billy had frozen in terror, the evidence of violence on his face wasn't real, like it was all fake somehow. He'd figured Neil wasn't exactly nice to Billy, and that they didn't get along, but… This was… He thought very suddenly of Max and bit his lip. Oh, God… Was he hurting her too? Was he hurting her Mom? He swallowed, not knowing what to say or what to do. He looked out the window at the endless pines covered in snowfall, the grey sky dark and blank, getting greyer by the minute, promising snow. When they finally pulled into the private drive that led to the cottage, it was flurrying softly.

"We're here," Nancy announced curtly, the first words she'd spoken since they'd driven away from Billy's house.

They all got out of the car and got their things, still not speaking. For some reason, Steve had a desperate need to touch Billy, to know that the vibrant and funny person he had slowly been discovering was still there. The hatred with which he had spoken about his father had shaken him. When Billy said he hated his father... He'd *meant* it.

Steve was afraid of what he might feel forced to do someday.

He walked quickly to Billy's side, and grasped his arm. Billy's head lifted, reacting to his touch.

The girls were walking ahead. Nancy had the keys to the cottage, Robin still clutching Billy's duffel bag. Steve lagged behind, at Billy's side.

"Are you okay?" Steve asked. Billy looked tense, lost, rigid. He looked like he was going to shatter like cracked glass.

"I need a bath. A hot bath," Billy whispered.

Steve didn't understand. What did he mean, a bath? What could—

It likes it cold.

Will had said that once. The Mind Flayer liked it cold. Wordlessly, Steve tugged Billy toward the steps leading into the cottage.

It was a tall cabin, with an upper floor and ceilings that curved to the slope of the A-frame roof. It had been in Steve's family for two generations, and had been built by his grandfather on his father's side in the late 1940s from the profit he'd made with his factory businesses. It was painted dark green, and had a tin roof. When Steve had been little, he had loved listening to the rain hitting the roof when he spent time there in the summer. The cottage was set into a plateau carved into a gentle hillside that sloped down toward the lake. The water was frozen now, covered in a layer of thick snow.

The door they entered was on the side of the cottage, and led into the kitchen and dining area. Past the kitchen was a small, cozy living room with plaid sofa and chairs, and a big fireplace. The back of the cottage had a door that led out onto a long, white veranda that looked out over the lake. The deck chairs had been taken into storage in the shed closer to the driveway. All of the walls inside were covered in a warm toned, cedar clapboard. A wooden staircase in the living room curled upward to a narrow hall, off of which two bedrooms and a bathroom were set against the sloped ceiling. Steve's mother had had a full tub installed when he was younger in order to 'bathe properly' when she was on vacation with her family.

Nancy and Robin were busy unloading the groceries they had bought from the car, putting them in the kitchen. Steve ignored them for the moment and took Billy upstairs, walking behind him on the narrow staircase to make sure he didn't make any missteps. When he got to the top, Steve went past him and led him to the bathroom. His aunt and uncle had used the cottage not two days ago, so he'd asked them to leave the propane on to keep the place warm. He was glad he did — He had come here in the winter before when he had to wait for the water to heat, and it had been miserable.

He flicked on the light as they went in. He went over to the tub and turned the tap on, as hot as he thought would be comfortable, and

plugged the tub.

“Okay,” he said. “It shouldn’t take too long…”

Billy was standing in the middle of the room, like he was lost in space, like if he reached out he would find nothing. Steve got up from the edge of the tub and walked over to him. He took his hand, and Billy tensed when he curled his fingers in his, holding his hand tight.

“It’s okay, man,” Steve murmured.

“Here,” he said, a little louder, after a few moments. “I’ll show you around.”

He led Billy to the different parts of the bathroom, telling him what was there, and Billy reached out to touch each object, making a small map in his mind. Once, Steve had asked him how he got around so well and he’d only given Steve a little smile and said he just counted.

“Okay,” Steve said, leading him back to the edge of the tub, letting go to shut off the valve. The room was steamy and hot. “That should be good… I’ll leave you to it.”

Squirming a little on the spot, he watched as Billy silently reached a hand into the water, looking pensive and sad. He had no idea what to say to him, so he steeled himself to leave, even though leaving Billy alone was the last thing he wanted to do.

“I’ll be back,” Steve promised quietly as he left.

Billy splashed the hot water on his face, his breath coming in fits and starts. He pooled water in his palms and poured it over his head. Droplets dripped down his face and he closed his eyes, leaning against the backsplash, swallowing hard. He had half-emptied and refilled the tub already, trying to keep it almost unbearably hot. The room was damp and humid.

There was a soft knock at the bathroom door.

“Yeah?” he called out, sniffing.

“It’s me.”

Steve.

“Come in,” Billy called.

He heard Steve come in, the snap of the door as he closed it behind him, the squeak as he sat down on the toilet seat, the click of something glass on the countertop.

“I just wanted to check on you, since you been in here so long,” he said. “Power went out. You’re lucky, it went out like five minutes ago… Otherwise your bath would’ve been pretty cold... I brought a candle.”

Billy scoffed quietly. “Won’t do me any good,” he mumbled.

Steve hesitated before speaking.

“You can’t see... Anything? Nothing at all?” he asked tentatively.

“No,” Billy whispered quietly, turning his head to where he heard Steve speaking. “It’s dark. Everything is... It’s all dark.”

They were quiet for a while.

“Well, I brought you a beer, anyway,” Steve said, plunking the can on the side of the tub. Billy reached for it cautiously, finding it. He yanked the tab off and let it fall into the water with him. He took a long drink, and when he finally came up for air, Steve was standing up, the toilet cover creaking.

“I’ll leave you alone,” he said. Billy licked his lips, Steve’s words sending a wave of loneliness washing over him like the gloaming of night.

“Steve,” he said, quietly, as he heard him open the door. “What… What’ll happen to me if I don’t get it back? My sight?”

Steve paused for several seconds.

“I don’t know,” he said, his voice a whisper.

Billy sat in silence, the hot water pruning his skin. After a minute or so, Steve opened up the door and left.

“Hey Billy...,” Steve said, his voice floating across the room and over to him, creeping into his sleepy mind.

“Mm?” Billy hummed, his eyes half-shut.He was turned away from where he could hear Steve getting ready for bed, the swish of fabric as he changed clothes, lying on the left side of a double bed. The girls had made the executive decision that they would bunk together, seeing as Nancy and Steve had history that made sharing a bed a little awkward for them. Billy didn’t give a shit. He just wanted to go to sleep.

“If you don’t mind me asking…,” Steve said hesitantly. “Why’d your Dad hit you?”

Billy’s eyes opened. He should have known it would come up, eventually. It had to. All evening it had been the elephant in the room, the scary and unexpected realization that Billy Hargrove regularly got smacked around by someone who should have loved him. He let out a small sigh. Steve’s question was so innocent it almost hurt him. As if Neil *needed* a reason to smack him around... This time, however, there really was a reason. This time, it was really Billy’s fault.

“He got the bill in the mail,” Billy said quietly.

“What?”

Of course Steve wouldn’t understand.

“He got the bill in the mail from the hospital in Indianapolis,” Billy clarified, rolling over onto his back, turning his head toward Steve, who was going through a fit of confusion and anger.

“Jesus... Why—“

“Well, it’s not like we got health insurance,” Billy interrupted flatly.

“So let me get this straight... You survive something horrific, and live

despite every doctor saying you probably wouldn't make it... And your Dad hits you because it cost him money?"

Billy could hear the righteous fury in Steve's voice. Deep down, he knew that it was just because Steve cared, that he couldn't fathom hurting him just for daring to survive... But instead of comforting him, it sort of pissed him off. It was all well and good to be angry on his behalf when he didn't have to pay for it... Or pay for *anything* , for that matter...

"Well, it's a little bit more complicated than that..." Billy sighed, frustrated.

"No, it's not! What the hell, Billy! That's fucked up, I—"

"I know it's fucked up!" Billy snapped, sitting upright suddenly. "Alright? I know!"

"Well, then—"

"Well then *what,* Steve? What? You just... You just say something is fucked up, and because King Steve said it, it just goes away? Like that?"

Billy felt a deep fury rising within him, shame mixed with the vindictive and hollow knowledge that Steve had never known difficulty, had never been beaten, had never had to worry about food or clothes. Living his life was a desperate and difficult task, one that Steve knew nothing about.

"That's not what I was going to—"

"Who's gonna pay for this, huh? *Me* ? Max probably won't ever get to go to college because of this shit! Because I lived, she doesn't even have a fucking future anymore! For some people, this is just how life is, alright? This is just the way it fucking is!"

"I'm just-"

"You will never know what my life is like, okay, Steve? Never! And you should be grateful that you won't! You live in a perfect fucking bubble where everything can be fixed because you want it fixed, but

it doesn't fucking work like that!"

Billy knew he was too angry, but he couldn't stop. Steve couldn't fix this. Nobody could.

"You know about the Mind Flayer creature shit... You know that about me... But all this other shit? You know *nothing* about, okay? *Nothing* !"

Billy stared sightlessly, breathing hard, his fists balled in his lap, his whole body trembling. He knew he was tearing up in anger and frustration, but he didn't care. Steve's life pissed him off, and he was pathetically jealous and pathetically ashamed of himself and his Dad... Nobody in his stupid family knew how to act right, and it was always his fucking fault. After a few moments, Steve spoke up, his voice very quiet.

"I was just trying to help..."

"Yeah? Well, you aren't, okay?" Billy sniffed, mashing his palms into his eye sockets to wipe away his tears. "You don't know what it's like. So stop trying to help me."

Steve didn't say anything, and that pissed Billy off even more. Resentful, sullen, and mostly angry with himself, he flung his body back down on the mattress and turned away from Steve, blocking him out, squeezing his eyes shut, his arms crossed, as far on the edge of the bed as he could get without falling off. He didn't even want to think about Steve. He was just a dumb rich boy who thought he could fix a lifetime of abuse and fear just by telling him it was fucked up.

Billy couldn't sleep, his mind raging like a horde of angry bees, flickering and buzzing with frustration and anger. Eventually, he heard Steve blow out the oil lamp and crawl into bed beside him, tentatively, like he was trying not to wake Billy up. He probably thought he was asleep. He heard Steve sigh very quietly, and heard him wipe his face, sniffing gently. Something very cold wound itself through the fury burning in his gut.

Was Steve... Crying?

Billy's eyes opened and he listened hard, like he was waiting for a signal from far away. He heard another sniff, so quiet Billy almost missed it. Steve's hand moved, and he heard the contact of skin on skin as he wiped at his face. He wanted to be angry. By all rights, Steve's crying should have pissed him off. He'd torn off another one of the bandaids that made Steve's life cushy and easy, and now he was going to cry about it, about the unfairness of it all, about the realization that life was cruel and hard. Crying about it was selfish, and Steve was selfish.

... But he was crying alone. He thought Billy was long asleep. He was crying quietly to not wake him up. He was crying on his own terms. He wasn't doing it for attention, he wasn't having a tantrum... He just sounded *sad* . Billy closed his eyes and rolled over onto his back. He heard Steve inhale, felt him freeze on the mattress. He didn't want Billy to know he was crying. Billy didn't say anything for many moments, keeping his eyes closed. The crying started again.

Billy wanted so badly to be pissed off, but he found it harder and harder to do as the minutes ticked by and Steve just sounded so miserable.

"I'm awake," Billy said quietly. "I been awake."

Steve inhaled sharply.

"I'll... I'll leave you alone," he said, his voice hitching. He started to get out of bed. "Sorry I kept you up—"

"Stop," Billy said, reaching a hand blindly out for Steve. He made contact with his torso, on his side. He felt Steve stop beneath his fingers.

"I'm sorry," Steve apologized, swallowing hard. "I... I don't know what it's like, you're right, I just..."

Steve spun on the mattress, turning toward Billy, so that his hand fell from his torso and ended up splayed over the flannel fabric covering one of Steve's knees.

"I just... I just don't want you to be.. Hurt," Steve said, obviously

trying to bolster himself up and stop crying. “Y’know, man? Like... I just... I just don’t want someone I care about to be living like that. It makes me fuckin’... Sad.”

Steve reached out and tentatively put a couple of fingers on the cut in Billy’s eyebrow.

“Does it hurt?” he asked quietly.

Billy screwed his eyes shut, Steve’s words reverberating in his head. *I just don’t want someone I care about to be living like that.*

“No,” Billy lied. He let Steve gently prod his face with his forefinger and thumb. He could feel his breath on his face as he came closer, inspecting his eye.

“It should be okay, in a few days,” Steve said quietly.

“Yeah,” Billy murmured.

Steve brushed his hair away from his forehead, a strange and gentle gesture that made his heart skip a beat and his cheeks fill with warmth. Steve held his hair in place, away from his forehead, and let out a watery snort.

“What?” Billy asked.

"You got a big forehead,” Steve said, a small laugh in his voice.

Billy opened his eyes and rolled them. “From what I remember, you got a pretty fuckin’ big dome too, buddy...”

“Hey! My forehead suits my face!” Steve protested, letting Billy’s bangs go and retracting his hand.

“More like your forehead is your face...” Billy muttered, snorting.

He realized his hand was still grasping Steve’s knee, and he gave it a squeeze before he took his hand back. He felt the covers shift as Steve settled down into bed, lying down. He hoped Steve understood what he meant by this touch. He barely understood what he meant by it, so he hoped at least one of them could figure it out.

“Hey, um. I am sorry, though,” Steve said. “You’re right. I don’t know anything about it... I just don’t want you to get hurt, y’know? You’re important to me.”

Billy was speechless. He hadn’t been important to anybody in his entire life. His father definitely didn’t think so, and his mother had thought him so unimportant she’d abandoned him. Steve’s apology had such a profound effect on him that he almost didn’t hear Steve when he spoke again.

“I just... If shit gets bad, you can come to my place, okay? Just... Give me a call at work or something, or at my house... Alright?... Billy?”

Billy licked his lips.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Yeah. Alright.”

“Alright,” Steve said, his hair swishing against the pillow as he nodded, “good.”

Many minutes of silence passed.

“Steve?”

“Mhm?”

“I’m sorry too, man.”

Steve sleepily reached out and patted his chest.

“S’okay,” he muttered.

A few minutes later he heard Steve’s breath even out. He was asleep.

Billy was wide awake.

He bit the inside of his lip, the treacherous thoughts that he kept at bay the majority of the time marching in with a loud fanfare. He’d closed his heart to those thoughts because he knew they’d never be returned, but Steve’s gentle touches had pulled them from the graves he’d tried to bury them in. What did these kinds of touches mean? He knew that he had no idea how people who cared for each other were

actually supposed to act. He didn't know what was normal, what wasn't normal, what were things you did because you wanted to show someone you cared, and things you did to show someone that maybe you loved. Maybe they were the same thing? Billy didn't know.

He only knew the lewd ways of getting from point A to point B. He had never realized just how nuanced caring for someone could be until he started to hang out with Steve, Robin, and Nancy. Harley had brought with her a familiar happy affection, but it was different with her, somehow. She had known him as a child. She had known the little boy who was still somewhere safe deep in his head. Steve and the others didn't know that little boy. The little kid that waved to his mother on the beach was so wildly divorced from who he'd grown to be that he sometimes felt like the happy memories he did have weren't his own, like he had inherited them from another life. His Mom had left and she'd taken that little boy with her, and he had never returned.

Billy didn't fall asleep for a long, long time.

February 15th, 1986

Billy listened as Robin breathed softly beside him on the thick sofa by the fireplace. The sound of paper flicked as she turned the pages of a book, humming every once in a while to herself as she read. The flames crackled energetically in the grate, and the heat radiating from the hearth felt hot on his feet and legs. For once, he was actually warm. Nancy and Steve had left for a walk a while earlier, going out to explore the snowy lakeside in the wintry afternoon sun. Billy pulled his legs up onto the sofa and curled them under his body, leaning his head down on the arm, curling his arms around his torso sleepily, facing the fire.

This weekend wasn't turning out to be anything like he'd ever experienced before. When Steve had invited him, he'd had a clear picture of what it was going to be like: drink their faces off away from prying eyes, eat terribly, and go home on a Sunday completely hung over. He had the feeling Steve was thinking along the same lines as him too, but... Then everything had changed. They had

shared a couple drinks and a couple joints the night before, but somehow it was different than before, quieter. Half napping in front of a fire wasn't exactly what he'd been expecting, but he supposed that at the end of the day they were all fucking exhausted. The summer had taken something from each one of them, and they were still trying to catch up.

It definitely wasn't the kind of partying he was used to, but... He could learn to get used to it. Billy felt his eyes closing, the heat radiating on his skin, dry and hot. He felt relaxed, more relaxed than he had been in a long time. He felt safe... The fire was warm... His Dad had no idea where he was... Robin was enjoying her book...

He must have drifted a little, because he startled when Robin put a blanket over him, a knitted one that smelled like wood smoke. He curled his hand into it.

"Thanks," he muttered, unsticking his tongue from the roof of his mouth.She patted him on the hip.

"No problem, big guy," she said, laughing softly. She adjusted herself and curled into the space between the couch and his knees, propping her hip against his butt and lounging her arm over his thigh, like he was a pillow. He let her. Half of him screamed to pull away, to get up and leave, but the other half of him felt exhilarated, like he was navigating a strange place in the dark that he desperately wanted to explore. For his entire life he'd hated to be touched, hated it when someone tried to get close for no reason. To him, touch was something you did because you had to, because you needed to get something done. The shadowy memories of past flings haunted him sometimes, the way that they would look at him longingly, the way they would sometimes kiss him just because, embrace him because they wanted to... The way that he'd pulled away and stopped them, and how their love would fade, how they would disappear from his life because he wouldn't let them love him.

Somehow this was different. Robin wanted to curl up beside him because she wanted to be close, and nothing more. Her presence in his life had become like a lighthouse beacon, something quick and witty that cut like a knife through the stormy and dark thoughts raging in his head. It wasn't necessarily that they talked all the time,

or even hung out together alone, but she was a strong and solid presence, someone who he could never dream of attempting to bend to his will, someone who wouldn't have bent to his will even if he tried. In a lot of ways, she was like what Steve had become to him; someone he used to think he could ignore or conquer, who had transformed into a complex entity before his eyes, a forest of emotions and dreams he could get lost in if he wasn't careful. He had come to the realization since the incident in the summer that the people around him refused categorization, refused simplicity in the way that he had tried for so long to control them. They could not be divided into groups that he could use or abuse for his benefit. Even when he had tried, when he had arrived in Hawkins and begun his plan to dominate and control the people he thought beneath him, he'd failed. Just like him, each person was a well of secrets, a deep pool that resisted his will. He realized that no matter how he'd insulted them, thinking he'd won, they would inevitably go home to their dreams, their friends, their families, their favourite movies, and live. He had been a dumbass to even think he could ever be their king, that he could ever have kept an iron hold on who they were.

Long ago he had known this, deep in his heart, a knowledge he didn't speak with words. It had come from being free and open in the safe spaces of Harley's parents' apartment, from the trees they had climbed, the beaches they had walked. It had been against everything his father could understand. He'd tried to live it, tried to be open and calm, but eventually... His father had won. His gut twisted in guilt for all the ways he had let Harley be hurt by his Dad, and then how he had hurt her by following his Dad's example. He prayed she knew he had changed into something ugly so he could survive. He hoped she knew he had become a monster to survive a monster... He knew it didn't erase the ways he'd hurt her. It would always be between them, a reminder of the choices he'd made when he felt he'd had no other options. He licked his lips, opening his eyes. What had happened between her and his Dad burned on his tongue. He was ashamed of it, but he needed someone to know.

"My Dad hit Harley once," he said, his voice stilted.

Robin stilled.

“I know,” she said quietly.

Billy closed his eyes. Robin and Harley had been exchanging letters for months now, long letters, so thick they sometimes didn’t fit properly into the envelopes. He had never asked what they talked about, but he supposed eventually it would have come up, the reason why he and Harley had stopped being friends. She had obviously told Robin what had happened, and he felt painfully exposed and rotten to know that she knew what his father had done. Robin’s body leaning on him, willingly touching him, felt heavy and undeserved, like he was being given a gift that was too valuable to conceive of and too hard for him to carry.

“She told me, in one of her letters,” Robin continued.

“Yeah,” Billy said. He clenched his jaw and swallowed. He felt the sudden urge to explain himself, even though it didn’t make any difference. He had done what he had done and no explanation could forgive it. Still, he needed to talk, like vomit was spewing up into his throat.

“My Dad was... Well. He never liked Harley. I spent a lot of time at her apartment with her parents, and you can probably guess why... For some reason that pissed him off. I dunno... One day she was at my house for some reason, I can’t remember why... We were fifteen. I had a little fight with my Dad. He called her…”

Billy squeezed his eyes shut and trailed off, shame and disgust at himself and his Dad feeling like poison in his veins.

“So I hit him,” Billy continued, his throat dry. “He hit me back. And then, he hit *her.* She looked… I…”

Billy stopped talking. He couldn’t speak for a few moments.

“She went home. Susan was out. He lied to her about what happened, said it was Harley who wrecked the house... Harley’s Mom went ballistic. There were almost charges. My Dad blamed it all on me, said it was my fault for becoming friends with… With someone like her. And she still tried to be my friend... And I... I just... I didn’t want her to be hurt by me anymore, so I started avoiding her and actin’

like a total asshole.... And then she went away."

"That's what Harley told me," Robin sighed, after a few moments. "She said you just became really angry and mean, and she just couldn't deal with how you were treating people anymore..."

"I was surprised that she called me at all," Billy murmured. "I thought she'd never wanna speak to me again..."

Robin shifted, putting both of her arms on his thigh, putting her head on her arms.

"Billy... She never stopped thinking about you. She thought about you a lot, even when you weren't friends. She was angry at you for a long time, but... She called you because she wanted to know if you were still the same asshole who'd left her behind, or if you were the person she had been so close to... And..."

Robin stopped and laughed a little. "I dunno if I should even be telling you this shit since it was a private conversation between me and her, but... She told me that the person who answered the phone wasn't either of those people, not the friend she knew or the asshole she left, but somebody different."

Billy didn't know what to say. Was he different? He guessed he was. Maybe he had changed again, been transformed by what he'd gone through. There was a lot of him that felt like the same asshole who had punched Steve so bad he'd almost killed him. There were a lot of parts of him who felt angry and pissed off and scared, parts of him who wanted to come out of the locker rooms smirking and mindlessly trying to break up families. These were parts of him he had held onto like a life raft, personality traits he'd carefully developed as ways to get what he needed. But there were parts of him he didn't recognize anymore and didn't have the words to name. The parts of him that regretted how he had hurt Max, the parts of him that ached for Steve to laugh, to hold Harley tight, to let Robin keep leaning on him like he was someone she could trust not to hurt her...

He wanted to tell Robin so many things. She was a confidant, someone who he knew he could trust to tell his deepest secrets the day he met her. He had, in fact. She was like him, in a lot of ways,

but had been raised up with love instead of fear.

“Do you love Harley?” he asked her.

Robin shifted. “….Why?”

“I just wanna know.”

“Yes,” Robin said quietly, her voice painfully truthful, void of any of her usual sarcastic wit. Billy nodded his head, his cheek rubbing against the sofa.

“Can I ask you if you love someone?” she asked tentatively, after a few moments.

Billy swallowed. “No.”

“Okay,” Robin said softly, sadly.

“Don’t be sad, Rob,” Billy said, reaching up an arm and finding her head, ruffling her hair. A small smile wove its way onto his face despite his hammering heart.

“Screw you, I’ll be sad if I want,” she said, her teasing manner coming back to her a little.

“Well, I can’t stop you,” he shrugged, smirking softly. He felt a little sad too, but somehow he found he was able to be okay with it, to smile anyways. Robin and Steve had that effect on him. He felt lighter. He hadn’t told anybody about what had happened between him, Harley, and his Dad before. It felt better to have it out of him, like he’d sucked out poison from a festering wound.

“Nobody can stop me,” she joked. “I’m unstoppable.”

“No doubt.” He retrieved his hand, curling it under his chin. Robin went back to her book. He listened to the pages turning, the fire crackling low. The dull throb that had been pounding behind his bruised eye was better now, only aching a little when he put pressure on it. It would be okay in a few days.

He would be okay in a few days.

Steve and Nancy crunched through the snow drifts that had blown in from the Northeast overnight, making their slow way across the ground toward the rocky edge of the frozen lake. Steve led the way, Nancy carefully retracing his steps. His boots were shorter than the drifts, and he winced as a bit of snow slid down into his shoe, wet and cold.

“Ugh,” he groaned.

“What’s up?”

“Snow in my boot...,” he grumbled. He leaned against the trunk of a nearby birch tree and pulled off his boot, wiping the snow that had settled into the folds of his jeans. He picked the snow out of his shoe and threw it away, shoving his boot back on and kneeling down to tie it again. Nancy stood beside him, looking around.

“I forgot how pretty this place is,” she said, looking out across the frozen lake where the wintry afternoon sun was sinking slowly toward the tree line, painting the white lake in oranges and yellows.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed, standing up and adjusting his puffy winter jacket. “It’s nice.”

They stood beside one another and listened to the chickadees sing in the bare branches. Steve sighed a little. No matter what he did, he felt tense. The feeling had plagued him since they had arrived at the cabin yesterday morning, feeling like his nerves were on fire. He felt like a total dumbass for not realizing that something was very wrong with Billy’s home life and was guilty about it. He felt like he should have known sooner somehow. His heart clenched whenever he looked over at Billy and saw his bruised eye. He looked over at Nancy and her face was unreadable.

“Well... You wanna keep going?” he asked her awkwardly.

“Oh, yeah,” she said, her voice far away.

He turned and kept walking through the snow drifts, thinking of

when he had been a kid and his grandpa had cleared off the ice so they could play hockey together. Behind him, Nancy walked like a silent shadow in his wake.

“So... What do you plan on doing this year?” Nancy asked him after a few minutes.

Steve snorted. “Jesus. I dunno. What about you? When you graduate, I mean?”

“I don’t know,” she sighed, laughing lightly. “Mom wants me to go to State... It was where she went before she married my Dad...”

“Your mom went to university?” Steve asked her curiously.

“Yeah,” Nancy said. “I... Well. I know she loves my Dad, but sometimes I get the feeling... I dunno… Like she wanted more for herself or something...”

Steve swallowed and blinked, thinking of Billy, who had apparently secured a date with Nancy’s mother last summer. He winced and changed the subject.

“Well— You’re super smart, and you already got that job with the Hawkins Post... You should go into investigative journalism or something. It was you who convinced Jonathan to go see that guy, right? To get justice for Barb?”

“Yeah,” Nancy said quietly. “I guess...”

Steve stopped and turned to her. “What’s wrong?”

“I just...,” Nancy began. She closed her mouth and began again. “I just feel like those were things I *had* to do. I... I needed to get justice for Barb. I needed to expose those government assholes. I needed to be at the Hawkins Post because I knew the truth about Hawkins... I don’t know if I want to make that my life’s work... Half of me just wants to find some meaningless job, something easy...”

Steve raised his eyebrows. Nancy was still looking for the perfect hideaway, the perfect simple distraction... Exactly what *he* had been to her. He knew that these things would never satisfy her. He and his

rich boy life, his assurance of a job and benefits, the likelihood he would stay in Hawkins forever... And it hadn't been enough. For Nancy, it would never be enough. He knew this now as a fact rather than a hurt, but he was surprised that her reaction to stress and danger was to try and retreat again. He supposed they all had their limits... And maybe Nancy had reached hers.

"That wouldn't satisfy you," he said, looking into her face. "A meaningless job wouldn't make you happy."

She swallowed. "No," she agreed. "I know it wouldn't. But... It seems so hard, so... I dunno... I mean... The people in my classes at State will be worrying about things like puppy mills and child labour, which are awful things, but... I think I'll always feel like I have to follow the Upside Down, like I'll always be the one journalist who has to make sure that everyone knows... I just feel like I'd have a burden that I can't tell anybody about."

Steve snorted derisively. For some reason, her answer pissed him off. She was acting like she was the only person burdened with the knowledge of the Upside Down, when they were all victims of its clutches. Hell— There was a group of fourteen year olds who had to go through puberty with this knowledge, traumatized and scared.

"Well," he said shortly. "I have to sell monster movies to people who have no idea that a monster tried to kill everyone I care about and almost *did* kill one of my friends. We all gotta make sacrifices."

He stomped off angrily.

Nancy let out a frustrated breath of air. "Oh, excuse me for having feelings!" she called after him. " *You* asked *me* , Steve!"

"Oh, spare me," Steve growled. "You know I didn't get into any colleges. You get to leave shithole county anytime you want and—"

Steve clamped his mouth shut. He was repeating exactly what Billy had growled at him months ago when they first started to hang out. How had that happened? Was he just mad at himself? Out of every one of them, it was Billy who had it the worst, ostensibly, but... He guessed they all had it equally bad in their way.

“You’re acting weird, Steve...,” Nancy called after him, annoyed. “I’m just... I’m just a little confused, is all...”

“What’s there to be confused about, exactly?” Steve demanded, stopping by a tree, putting his hands on his waist and staring at her, panting.

Nancy crunched through the snow towards him, her lips twisting thoughtfully. She sighed heavily, her anger draining quickly. “I don’t know... It just doesn’t seem like you, all...”

She gestured emphatically back toward the cabin in the distance. “All this.”

He knew what she was talking about. She thought it was out of character for him to try and be friends with Billy, take Robin into his heart, climb through Billy’s window and risk getting his ass kicked... Quite frankly, he also had a feeling that she thought it was out of character for him to infiltrate secret Russian facilities and willingly protect a bunch of fourteen year olds.

The thought stung him a little.

“Well,” he said bluntly. “I guess you never knew me as well as you thought you did.”

Nancy paused, her eyebrows knitting together.

“No, I... I guess not.”

Steve looked down at his boots in the snow, crossing his arms. *He* didn’t know her as well as he thought he did, too.

“I didn’t mean for that to be... Rude or something,” she said, shifting feet, crossing her arms, mirroring him.

“Yeah, I know,” Steve said roughly.

“Steve... Look,” she sighed, dropping her arms to her side and coming closer. “I just... I feel like I’m not really friends with you guys... I feel like... Like I’m just here because you feel bad... And it doesn’t really hurt me, I just... I don’t know. I just don’t know you anymore,

Steve."

"I don't know you either," he grumbled, feeling angry. "And honestly? I don't think I ever did. You never let me in, Nance, I..."

Steve rubbed his face with his hands.

"I think you really liked me one time, but... But the Upside Down changed everything, it made everything harder, and I think you just... You just needed to face it in a way I wasn't ready for yet..."

"Steve..."

"It's fine, okay? It is. I'm just... I just want you to stop thinking about how I used to be. I'm not that guy anymore... I haven't been for a really long time, you just weren't around to see it..."

He let his hands fall and looked at Nancy. She looked very small, her arms wrapped around her body, her face pale and sad. Her mouth was parted slightly. She looked hurt and lonely.

"Shit...," he muttered, sighing heavily, feeling guilty. "I'm... I'm sorry, Nancy, I'm just... I'm tired, and I'm afraid for Billy, and... I just don't know..."

"I don't have anybody but you," Nancy said, her voice thick, wobbling. She looked like she was going to cry. "Every person I had is gone now..."

"Oh... Nance..."

Steve felt so stupid for lashing out. She was just trying to make conversation and he'd jumped down her throat. In his heartbreak he kept forgetting that Nancy really *was* alone, that Jonathan was far away, that her best friend since childhood was long dead. She was quiet to begin with, and seemed to have a hard time making friends. It seemed that without Steve's help, she wouldn't have had any.

He stepped forward and pulled her into a hug.

"Listen, these past two years have been shit," he said into her hair. "But you're a big reason why it wasn't totally shit. Okay?"

She laughed tearily into his coat. “Okay,” she said thickly.

After a few minutes they pulled away.

“Damn,” he said, sniffing, his throat constricted. “This weekend isn’t goin’ how I planned at all... I mean, I expected some good old fashioned drinking our faces off and passing out and eating nothing but chips and hotdogs...”

“That can still be arranged,” Nancy said, laughing a little.

“Yeah,” Steve sighed. He took Nancy’s hand and gently led her along the path. They walked around the perimeter of the lake for a few minutes.

“Oh, Nancy?”

“Hm?”

“What makes you think we aren’t your friends?”

Nancy looked at the ground as she walked.

“I don’t know,” she said eventually. “I just... I feel like you and Robin and Billy have this bond that I can’t touch, like Robin and Billy have this connection with you that I don’t...”

She smiled a little. “I guess… I guess I’m a little jealous.”

“Aw,” Steve smiled, nudging her. “Jealous for little old me?”

“Yes,” she sighed, rolling her eyes teasingly. “Don’t let it get to your head...”

“Too late,” Steve chuckled. He looked sidelong at her. She still looked pale and tired. She was so strong and brilliant he sometimes forgot she was just a young person, like he was, like they all were. He supposed it was his fault, really. He’d love her so much he’d put her up on a pedestal that she’d never asked to be put on. She was just trying to get through it all, same as the rest of them. He stopped walking and she looked at him.

“Listen, Nance... Robin and Billy have different friendships with me, it’s true... But you’re special too. You have a special bond with me too. You’ll always have one. Shit… You helped me do a *lot* of growing up. I’m grateful for it, and… I’m grateful for you, too.”

Nancy looked into his face and then nodded slowly. “Okay,” she said softly.

Steve looked away, feeling a little overwhelmed. Nancy tended to do that to him, even though he wasn’t in love with her anymore, even though their relationship had changed. He started walking again, and changed the subject.

“I feel dumb for not realizing Billy’s Dad was like that,” he grimaced. “All the signs were there, I just... I dunno. I guess you just hope people's lives are better than they actually are...”

“Yeah,” Nancy said quietly. “His dad really scared me...”

“Jesus, that’s you *scared* ? I wouldn’t want to see you angry then... You looked like you were gonna pull the car around and flatten his Dad with it...”

Nancy smiled a little, a sparkle in her eye. “Yeah... I guess if we all have fight or flight responses mine is definitely fight...”

“No shit,” Steve snorted, smiling. “I’m pretty sure if Neil appeared in the car with us you’d have chopped his head off with sheer willpower.”

“Jonathan’s Dad used to try and hit him sometimes, you know,” Nancy said musingly. “Push him up against furniture, that kinda thing... But Jonathan would just push him right back, hit him right back, and eventually his Dad left them... Couldn’t bully them, I guess...”

“Maybe it’s been... A long time,” Steve said quietly. He tried to picture what Billy would have looked like as a kid, dirty blonde curls bouncing, maybe a toothy grin... He had a bad feeling that kid was hurt pretty bad and still lived somewhere in Billy’s mind, helping him survive. He thought about his own Dad skating with him on this very

lake, playing hockey, and swallowed. He couldn't understand Neil, why he would hurt his son like that, why he would make him live in fear like that. Billy had been frozen with terror when Steve had urged him to leave, frightened out of his wits, caught like a deer in headlights.

That kind of terror didn't happen overnight.

"Do you think... Does Billy...," Steve began haltingly, rubbing the back of his head. "Sometimes it's hard for me to tell if Billy actually likes being around me. I mean. I'm pretty sure he does, but... It's sort of hard to tell with him, you know? He isn't big on words, and sometimes I feel like I piss him off..."

"You had a fight last night," Nancy said knowingly.

"Yeah— Shit. I guess you girls could hear that..."

"Well," Nancy said thoughtfully, "I think Billy is right about one thing... You *are* a rich spoiled brat."

"Wow, thanks Nancy..."

"I'm a spoiled brat, too," Nancy sighed, "You and me, we had a lot to learn about reality... Jonathan got pissed off at me for the same thing, once... And Billy and Jonathan are right..."

"Yeah, I know," Steve sighed.

"But I think he likes you, and I think he likes you a lot," Nancy said slowly, "Even if you do piss him off sometimes."

"I just get the feeling that sometimes he's just... Settling. That I'm just the guy that's there, you know?" Steve said, rubbing his arm.

"I don't think that's true," Nancy said, tilting her head. She was walking beside him now, their arms entwined, crunching along lower drifts, twigs snapping beneath their feet. "You put yourself in harm's way for him yesterday... I think he can tell you care about him, and I think he'd do the same for you."

"I guess...," Steve shrugged uncomfortably. He really wanted to

believe that Billy would come out swinging for him, but the guy was very hard to read. He wasn't at all like Robin, who, though sarcastic, wasn't afraid to tell him exactly how she was feeling. He wasn't even like Nancy, who eventually would confess herself when pressed... He was tight lipped, and had only told Steve he liked being friends with him once, when he had been too fucked up drunk to stop himself. He supposed he might have been asking too much for Billy to be clear with his feelings, seeing as that kind of shit didn't exactly seem in line with the bruise on his face and the way Neil Hargrove stalked about the house. But still... He was feeling a little tender right now and his misplaced guilt egged him on. He felt like he should have stopped Neil somehow, and he felt stupidly hurt that Billy hadn't told him what was going on. He knew it was selfish and dumb, but he couldn't help it.

"He doesn't really show stuff back, you know? So it's just... It's hard to tell," he said, sighing.

"Maybe you aren't looking hard enough," Nancy said, seeming a little amazed that he would question it. "I mean... He actually talks to you, and he lets you touch him... I dunno if you noticed, but he doesn't like to do either of those things. He talks more when you're in the room and he doesn't seem so upset that he has to have help to get around if it's you that's doing it... I'd say that's pretty obvious he might like being your friend..."

Steve blinked. Nancy must have been wrong somehow... He didn't mind when she or Robin touched him... He talked to them, too... Then his mind recalled their Saturday afternoon drives, the way Billy laughed more when they were together, just the two of them. Had he really come to trust Steve that much? He thought about all the ways Billy contentedly let him help, let him lead, let him touch. He thought about their walks, shooting the shit over greasy eggs and dishwater coffee. Billy didn't often share, but sometimes he did. When he did, he shared quietly, like he was talking for Steve and only Steve. He thought back to the way they had both grimaced in distaste any time that Steve was forced to touch Billy, when they first started to hang out. He saw the slow relaxing of Billy's shoulders over the course of the last few months, and was struck.

There it was, plain and simple, all the feelings that Billy found hard

to express... They were in the way Billy sometimes ruffled his hair, or reached out for him, or teased him, or told him something about himself quietly. Maybe he hadn't told Steve what was going on because he wanted to protect him, not because he didn't trust him.

This thought humbled Steve, and made him very, very sad. Billy had obviously been enduring this shit for a long time, enough that he felt like he could weather it to protect other people from ever having to deal with it. He'd been so hesitant to leave, to not be there when Max and Susan came home… He wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't seen the slow changes in him, how he had allowed himself to be open to Max's love and the comfort of people who actually gave a shit about him. He thought about how Billy had slammed Lucas against a shelf and wondered how he felt about it now. He wondered the kind of shame that might be living inside, the violence that lived in his head…

"Steve?" Nancy asked.

Steve had stopped talking, but hadn't noticed, deep in his thoughts. He felt tears prickling at his eyes, cold on his eyelashes in the frigid wind whistling across the flat lake. He stopped walking.

"Yeah, sorry," he said, sniffing once and rubbing a gloved hand over his face. "I'm just... I'm just worried about him, is all."

"I know," Nancy said softly, putting a hand on his shoulder.

Billy was stoned.

Robin had brought a couple of blunts to the cottage with her, and one of them was a bonafide fatty, almost the diameter of his finger. Robin had already drank a bit of vodka before they'd wandered out onto the veranda to hit it together. She'd taken two puffs, coughed once, and then backed out, laughing.

"Shit," she spluttered. "Oops. Think I might've went overboard with that one…"

“Naw, this is the good shit,” Billy said, holding the smoke in his lungs. He exhaled long, the familiar feeling of his nerves going dead blooming in his body. He opened the porch door.

“Rob’s done, someone come out here and help me finish this,” he called into the cottage. Nancy shook her head, her eyes closed, waving him off. She was half passed out on the couch, cradling a mostly empty bottle of wine. Only Steve had answered his call, coming out to stand with them out in the freezing cold on the deck.

“ *‘I told you, Dad, I don’t do drugs... It’s just marijuana,’* ” Robin mocked, putting her face in Steve’s face, laughing.

“What?” Steve asked, passing the blunt back to Billy.

“You said that... When we were drugged by the Russians, you said that,” Robin snorted, cackling. “You don’t remember?”

“No,” Steve chortled. “Not at all. Who was I talking to?”

“Uh... Maybe Dustin... Or maybe that torture guy, I don’t really recall…”

“Alright— I was a little busy when all that shit with the Russians went down, what in the *fuck* was that?” Billy asked, handing Steve back the joint. Steve took it from him, and he and Robin burst out laughing.

“Okay,” Robin began. “So. We were working at Scoops in the mall, right?”

“Uh huh…”

“So, Dustin overhears a message in Russian on his radio, and he comes to Steve to help him translate. Or, more specifically, me, because I’m super talented and know like four languages.”

“Huh.”

"So, we translate it, and it’s a coded message—“

“I figured out that it was talking about the Starcourt Mall, so we

decide to watch the shipments coming in… Long story short, we got stuck in an elevator, endanger two children, get caught in a Russian spy facility deep under the mall trying to re-open the door to the Upside down, they catch us… They think we're like, American spies or some shit–"

"They tie us to chairs and take Steve away, and start like, demanding to know who we work for, beating his poor pretty face in–"

"And I kept telling him, like… Sorry, dude, we're just some teenagers working at a fucking ice cream store who figured out their whole deal–"

"Man, that really burned his ass," Robin snorted. "You could tell. He wouldn't believe us. But Dustin and Erica, Lucas' little sister, they escaped, so… Then we escaped with them and then the whole Mind Flayer thing…"

Billy shook his head, baffled. "This town is *fucked* ."

The three of them stood in silence for a few seconds, mulling over what they had gone through, and inexplicably began to laugh.

"This town is fucked," Steve agreed, leaning his head onto Billy's shoulders, wheezing.

Billy, Steve, Nancy and Robin crunched through the snow, the chill night clear and crisp. Each one of them was more than a little twisted in one way or another, having managed to guzzle down the dangerous amount of beer they had brought with them that had been forgotten in the drama of the previous day. They retraced the steps Nancy and Steve had taken earlier, and forged new tracks over the thin layer of snow on top of the thick ice. A cold snap over the last few weeks had frozen the lake solid. The gritty crystals frozen into the surface made walking easy, though it was still slippery in parts. They made their leisurely way across it, Robin skipping and hopping gracefully across the ice like a fairy or a nymph, Billy and Steve in the middle, and Nancy calmly taking up the rear. Steve looked ahead toward the far side of the lake, past Robin, and was amazed he could

see it so well. The moon was high, almost full, and cast a bright, glowing blue light across the forest. He marvelled at the lovely winking stars above him as he walked, watching a few small, wispy clouds make their lazy way across the sky. Beside him, Billy was holding his arm in an iron grip.

“How do you know if the ice is thick enough?” Billy demanded, walking like he was on eggshells.

“Oh my God,” Steve groaned, rolling his eyes. “It’s thick enough… *Chill out.* ”

He grinned at his own little pun, but Billy seemed to be too preoccupied with somehow falling through the ice to notice it.

“That was a crack, Harrington!” Billy cried out, stopping dead, acting like he were on a swaying ship on the sea. “I swear to fucking god that was a crack!”

“Probably,” Robin called back to them from her place a few yards ahead. “Ice makes cracking noises sometimes.”

“ *Sometimes?* ” Billy demanded. “Then how the hell are you supposed to know if it’s breakin’ or something?”

“You don’t!” she called to him, dancing away in the moonlight.

Steve laughed at Robin, whose light touches and graceful movements barely seemed to register on the surface of the ice. Nancy joined them, standing on Billy’s other side, and looked sidelong at him.

“You good, cowboy?” she asked him, smirking, her voice a little garbled from liquor.

Billy was muttering darkly to himself, and Steve overheard some curses and some epithets about ‘ *crazy people from Indiana* ’ and ‘ *goddamn fucking ice* .’ Steve pretended not to notice, giving Billy a serene smile and readjusting his arm, ushering him along. Their goal was to get to the middle of the lake, for what purpose he couldn’t remember— But he was glad to be walking and breathing in the crisp air. It was a gorgeous evening.

“Is this really your first time on ice?” Steve asked him curiously, trying to get his attention away from how nervous he clearly was. “Not even an indoor rink or something?”

“No,” Billy grumbled. “And I still don’t see the point of it...”

“Didn’t you ever go roller skating?” Steve snorted, adjusting his scarf with his other hand as he walked.

“Well, yeah, when I was younger...”

“Well, ice skating is just like that. If you were an okay roller skater you’ll be an okay ice skater...”

“No way. This is totally fuckin’ different... And ice skating would be totally different too. Blades on your goddamn feet? No fuckin’ way, Harrington...” Billy bit. He was obviously extremely anxious, and Steve was almost amazed at just how nervous he was. He hadn’t expected this. Though, from the way Billy seemed to be biting his head off, it seemed Billy hadn’t accounted for it either. He’d been all gung-ho for it when they’d left the cabin. Now he seemed to be regretting his decision deeply. Nancy patted him reassuringly on the shoulder, still smiling, and moved on, sprinting toward Robin who was twirling around.

“Hey, dude, don’t worry,” Steve said, trying another tack. “It’s okay. You’re safe.” He gave Billy a small encouraging nudge in the side with his elbow.

“But— How can you know that? It’s fuckin’... It’s just ice in the middle of the woods, it could be thin or—or—“

Steve’s eyes widened. Billy was genuinely panicking. He sounded extremely pissed off, but his body language said differently. He was coiled, his spine bent, like he was bracing for a blow.

“Woah, dude. Calm down!” Steve urged, moving his arm from where it was intertwined with Billy’s and putting it across his shoulders. Billy was breathing funny. He’d seen his aunt receive terrible news once, when he was fourteen, and she had started to breathe like Billy was starting to breathe now. Next thing they knew, his aunt had

passed out. Seeing as he liked his Billy Hargroves with even less bruises than he currently had, he knew he had to find a way to get Billy to calm down before he knocked himself unconscious in the middle of a frozen lake.

“Listen— I know this lake. I have skated and walked on this lake since I was a kid. I know what it sounds like when it’s too thin, I know what it looks like when it’s thick enough,” he explained calmly, gripping Billy’s shoulders. “Okay?”

Billy’s head was bent, his legs splayed wide, as though if he wasn’t careful he would fall right through.

“Billy,” Steve said, putting his head close. “Do you trust me?”

Billy’s head lifted and he took a few breaths.

“I want to,” he said, finally.

This was the most honest Billy had ever been with him. He didn’t lie and say he did trust him to make Steve feel better, or lie and say he didn’t because he was angry and scared.

“Okay,” Steve said, sliding his arms down to Billy’s elbow. “I promise that you will be okay. And if you’re okay, then... You know you can trust me, right?”

“Okay,” Billy said, licking his lips.

Steve hooked his arm through Billy’s, his heart hammering, walking as confidently as he could across the ice. He did trust the ice—years of walking on it, year after year, and learning the warning signs gave him confidence. But now that he knew Billy was putting his trust in him, he was a little nervous. He didn’t want the ice to make a liar out of him.

“There,” Steve said, after a minute. “We’re standing in the middle of the lake.”

Robin and Nancy were standing near, looking up into the deep sky at the winking and dazzling stars. It was freezing, but beautiful, the brisk air sobering them all up a little. He could feel Billy shivering

beside him, his head down, and felt a little silly to have dragged him out here when he couldn't see how beautiful the stars were.

"The stars are... They're incredible," he told Billy.

Something pinched and tired flashed across Billy's face and Steve bit his lip. He looked up at Robin and Nancy, who were staring transfixed at the sky.

"Let's go," he told them quietly. Gobsmacked and red cheeked with liquor, they tore their eyes away from the sky and looked at him, arm in arm with Billy, who was trembling.

They moved off the ice towards the lights of the cabin in the distance.

As they walked, Steve could feel Billy's steps getting lighter and easier, learning to trust the grainy ice under his boots. After five minute walk back across the lake, they crunched back onto the snowy, solid ground. When they stepped off the lake, Billy's head lifted and he let out a small breath of obvious relief.

Back in the warmth of the cabin, he handed Billy a beer, who was sitting in the chair by the fire. He was about to turn away when Billy grabbed his arm.

"Harrington," he began. "I trust you... But don't ever make me do that again."

Steve smiled at him. "You got it, buddy."

Billy was freezing and had half a mind to grope his way downstairs and sleep on the floor by the fireplace. His feet felt like blocks of ice attached to his body. He was shivering. He had no idea how Steve could stand it, the room being this cold. He was beside Billy, curled into the covers, snoring softly without a bother in the world. He hated being so vulnerable to the cold. When he moved to Hawkins, it felt like he'd unlocked a weakness he hadn't known about because he'd never had to deal with it. Now, for the second winter in a row,

he was half fucking frozen and unimaginably grumpy. He didn't understand why it seemed to be just him, either. Max seemed to have adjusted just fine... He'd had quite a few beer and had desperately tried to fall asleep while he was still too woozy and drunk to care about the chill in the room, but he'd begun to sober up a lot sooner than he would have liked, and now he was wide awake, shivering, with no idea what time it was.

Steve was like a furnace beside him, oddly hot, like his body temperature just ran warmer somehow. He didn't understand it and it pissed him off irrationally. He knew logically it wasn't Steve's fault, but he felt particularly vindictive in that moment. Biting his lip mischievously, he slowly reached a foot out towards Steve's, inching toward him until he laid his freezing foot flat on top of his warm one. Steve jumped away in his sleep, snorting, smacking his lips. Billy smirked, and inched his foot ever closer again. He found Steve's foot again and this time, Steve jumped a little less dramatically, humming sleepily. Emboldened by his success, his other foot joined its twin, curling up on top of Steve's free foot, sucking the heat out of them like a vampire. The rest of him was still pretty fucking cold but at least his feet were warm now... He turned his body so that he was facing Steve, and inched a little closer, curling into himself, trying to preserve what little body heat he felt he had. He—

Steve rolled over and faced him.

"Dude, what the fuck?" Steve muttered sleepily.

Billy pretended he was sleeping.

"You're not asleep, I just saw your eyes close, dingus," Steve snorted.

Billy opened his eyes, snatching his feet back.

"I'm fucking frozen, Harrington," Billy grumbled. He knew he was bitching but he couldn't help it. The cold was a bitch and it made him act like one.

"Is that why you're tryin' to play footsies with me?" Steve asked, yawning. "Jesus Christ, your feet were like ice..."

Billy didn't deign that with a response. Instead, he yanked the covers up to his chin and rolled to his other side, facing away from Steve.

"It is kinda cold in here, huh," Steve said, his voice thick with sleep. Billy could tell he was already falling back to slumber. Billy gave up. He was going to have to just ride out the night, and nap in the car on the way home. He thought about his Dad, and the fact that he'd run away... He thought about Max, and Susan. Were they home already? He hoped so... If he was lucky it might mitigate some of the repercussions he had waiting for him... He hoped, at least... He swallowed nervously. Maybe his Dad would take out his anger on them… He bit his lip and tried not to think about that too hard. He pulled the blankets closer under his chin, his nose cold.

Suddenly, Steve was very, very close. He slipped an arm under his neck and drew him in, slick as you please, as though he had rehearsed it. His face breathed into Billy's long hair, an arm wrapping itself clumsily about his waist, resting on his belly. Flush against Billy's body, Steve tangled their legs together.

"There," Steve groaned sleepily. "Now y'can stop bitchin.'"

Billy's cheeks went very, very pink, and he was very grateful it was dark.

February 16th, 1986

Billy kept his head forward as Steve pulled to a stop beside his house. His duffel bag was in his lap. In the ten minutes since they had dropped off Nancy and Robin, Steve had been begging him to stay at his house, to not go back to Cherry Oak drive. Billy had been silent the whole time, knowing it was inevitable, knowing that no matter what Steve said, he would have to go back. Steve had tried begging and being angry, but nothing had worked. As the car slowed and he shifted into park, a tense silence lapsed between them.

"Don't go in there," Steve whispered, practically begging. "Please?"

“I can’t stay away forever,” Billy said, finally replying.

Steve sounded like he wanted to disagree, but he held his tongue.

“Alright,” Steve said. “But I’m walking you to the door. If Susan isn’t there... You’re coming back to my house. Deal?”

Billy turned his head away from Steve. His caring felt like pity, and he couldn’t help but feel a flash of annoyance. Didn’t Steve get that this was his problem, his pain? He had no right to intrude on it... All those times he had cried alone hoping someone would come and save him were just fantasies, and now that someone was trying to help, he wasn’t sure if it was what he really wanted. His friends knowing what his life was really like made him feel exposed, violated somehow— like they had discovered a disgusting and precious habit that he had kept secret.

Steve clutched his knee. He wouldn’t be deterred. Billy half admired and half hated him as he chewed on his thumb, forcing his head to nod.

“Fine,” he muttered.

“Your Dad’s truck isn’t there— You said Susan rented a car?”

“Mhm,” Billy muttered.

“Well— If they aren’t home—“

“Let’s just go,” Billy said roughly, getting out of the car, pulling his duffel bag onto his shoulder and slamming the door. A minute later Steve appeared and wove his arm through his, leading him to the front door.

“I’m coming in with you,” Steve said firmly, and Billy wanted to fight him but he knew he wouldn’t win. Steve was stubborn as a mule and he had clearly set his mind on this.

They walked inside the house.

Billy heard the tap running in the kitchen, the sound of the rings on Susan’s fingers tapping a frying pan as she washed it. The soft sound

of music came filtering down the hall from Max's bedroom.

"Hello?" Susan called out, coming toward them.

"Oh, Billy— Oh."

They stood across from each other, Billy lifting his head so she could see his face, his expression stony. Beside him, Steve let go of his arm.

"Hi Mrs. Hargrove," Steve greeted, a little stilted. Billy winced. He hated when people called Susan that. She wasn't his mother and she should have never married Neil.

"Hello," she greeted. She sounded exhausted. "You boys went to your cottage... Right?"

"Yep," Billy said curtly.

"I see," Susan said, her voice wispy and far away. "I'm making dinner..."

He heard her walk down the hallway back to the kitchen.

Billy heard Steve let out a noise of amazement and disgust. He was steered somewhat forcefully into his bedroom by Steve, who parked him on his bed and then closed his door loudly.Steve stood there, breathing heavy for many minutes.

Billy knew he was furious, but Steve also knew that there wasn't much he could do. There wasn't any quick fix, no magic solution that Steve could whip out of nowhere and make all of their lives better. Billy could practically hear the tirade of anger and disgust that was bubbling up through Steve's body, but he didn't speak it. Instead, he marched over to Billy's bed and threw himself down beside him on the mattress.

After a few seconds, Steve's arms wrapped themselves tightly around him, his head burying into the side of his neck. Billy's lips parted in shock. Out of all of the reactions, this was the one he had least expected. Steve breathed angrily, furiously, into Billy's neck for a few moments.

“She didn’t even care,” Steve managed, his voice cracking with sadness and rage.

“Neil hurts her too,” Billy said emotionlessly.

He felt Steve bite his lip against his skin, obviously holding back the judgements he so obviously wanted to make. Hot tears stained the side of Billy’s neck. Steve pulled away, sniffing loudly.

“You’re all gonna get out of here someday,” Steve vowed, his voice constricted with emotion. “Soon. I promise.”

Billy was touched by Steve’s innocent conviction, his optimistic faith that things would turn out. He knew it wasn’t realistic, but his heart was touched by it all the same.

Steve made him want to believe.

“Okay,” he muttered. It was the only thing he could think of to say.

10. "I Want To Break Free" – Queen (1984)

March 8th, 1986

Billy prodded his eye and was relieved to feel that it wasn't tender anymore. His fingers touched the cut on his eyebrow and felt smooth flesh. He'd healed pretty quick this time. He snorted humorlessly to himself. His body had had a lot of practice over the last few months. He sat on his bed and pulled on a pair of boots, butting a cigarette into the ashtray on his side table. Steve was meeting him in half an hour. Someone knocked on his door and he started. He knew it was Max, because his Dad tended to pound on his door like he was going to smash through it, and Susan never knocked on his door if she could help it. When she did, it was so soft he almost never heard it. Steve tended to just walk right in, a habit that annoyed and amused him at the same time.

"Billy! Can I come in?" Max called.

"Yeah," he called back. He heard paper crackling in her fingers as she strode into his bedroom, closing his door behind her and sitting down on his bed, the springs creaking.

"Um... Eleven sent you a letter," Max explained. Billy slid the cuff of his jeans over his boots and lifted his head, confused, straightening up.

"Oh.. Okay."

"Yeah!" Max said, laughing a little. "Um. Want me to read it to you?"

Billy shrugged. He was a little caught off guard. He had no idea what Eleven could possibly have to say to him.

"Okay," Max said, unfolding a few papers. "Fair warning— She's still learning how to read and write and stuff, so it might take me a minute. They didn't exactly teach her any of that in the lab."

Max's voice was light, but Billy could tell she was bitter and angry.

The injustices that swarmed around this town got to her in a bad way, the way they got to Nancy. She sniffed, clearing her throat.

“Okay, here it is...”

" *Dear Billy* ,” Max recited. “ *This is El. I hope that you are ok. You can’t see right now. I hope that you can see again.* ” She paused, trying to make something out. “ *We went on a trip. We went to the beach in main. It is beautiful. Just like in your head. I love the beach.* ”

Max paused, reading ahead.

“ *I went in your head and I saw good things and I saw bad things too. I did not ask to go in your head. I am sorry for went in your head* ,” Max read. “She probably means ‘sorry for going in your head.’”

Billy swallowed.

“ *I hope you are okay in your head* ,” Max continued, a quiet, sad laugh in her voice. “ *The bad men are scary and the dark place is scary. I am scared of the bad men and the dark place too.* ”

Billy shifted on his bed. Max took a few seconds before she started again.

“ *You can send me letters. Letters help me read and I am happy writing. I am sorry I am not good at writing. I feel better when I write a letter. Maybe you feel better when you write a letter. Max writes letters. Put your letter with her letter if you want. I am sorry again. It is ok if you are mad. I hope you are happy even if you are scared. Love, El.* ”

Max was quiet for a moment. “She uses El instead of Eleven ‘cause she’s scared of people finding her,” Max explained. “And the dark place is our code for the Upside Down.”

Billy nodded, his head hanging, thinking.

“Do you wanna write her back?” Max asked, sounding a little hopeful. “She’d like that, I think.”

Billy lifted his head. He did want to write her back. He needed her to know that he was thankful for what she’d done.

“Uh, yeah. Alright,” he said, taking a cigarette out and lighting it. “Can you, uh— Write it down?”

“Sure!” Max said. She went into her room to get paper and a pen, and came back and sat on his bed.

“Okay— Go ahead.”

Billy had never done this before, had someone write down the words he spoke. He shifted uncomfortably.

“Dear El,” Billy began, rubbing his chin self consciously. “Uh... Thanks for your letter. That was really nice.”

He let out a little bark of laughter. “I can’t read or write good either. Don’t worry about it.”

He paused, wringing his hands in his lap. What could he possibly say to this girl, this selfless little hero who had gone through unspeakable horrors and grown in a place completely devoid of love and feeling, who still somehow found it in her heart to be brave and sweet? He was a petty fucking bully who had a crap Dad and he’d let that be his excuse for being an asshole for so long that he barely knew himself as anything else. This girl had never known kindness until she escaped, and still she persevered, still she chose love. He closed his eyes. He kept his words simple. He knew she’d get the hang of reading someday, and he was happy to help out this incredibly kind girl grow to express herself in ways he’d never been able to.

“I’m happy that you liked the beach. One day me and Max will take you to the beach in California and I’ll teach you how to surf. I think you’d like it.”

“She would,” Max said, the pen scratching on the paper. “She’s kind of a daredevil.”

Billy smiled softly, nodding. He waited for Max to finish before he continued.

“I forgive you for going in my head,” he began, licking his lips. “I... I saw you and I let you in. He was gonna hurt you. I wanted to protect you from him so I let you in. It’s... It’s okay that you saw the bad

things. I'm... Uh..."

He cleared his throat.

"I'm happy you saw the good things too." He stopped, trying to find his words. "Thank you for helping me even though you saw the bad things."

He heard Max pause before she scribbled his words down on the page. He was divulging his heart a little more than he was used to, but he owed it to Eleven. She didn't need or deserve his pretences. She'd been in his head, had seen the things he'd done, and still reached for him and believed that he wasn't all bad.

"Billy," he finished. He felt nervous, his stomach flipping, his heart beating hot in his chest. If Max was surprised or amazed at how he'd expressed himself to Eleven she blessedly kept it to herself.

"Alright," Max said, getting up from his bed. "I'll send it to her with my letter."

"Thanks," Billy said. He inhaled on his cigarette, exhaling slowly. Max hovered by his door and something lapsed between them, something heavy and sad. Suddenly, Max walked across the floor of his room and put her arms around his shoulders, placing her chin on his head. She held him for a few moments, his spine rigid, unmoving, wanting to hug her back but not knowing if he should, if he deserved to hold her. Then, she let go, standing tall, walking over to the door.

She paused, like she wanted to say something. He bent his head, his shoulders dropping.

She left the room.

March 15th, 1986

Billy opened his eyes to the sound of rolling thunder. He blinked slowly, sleepily. Rain spattered loudly on his bedroom window and he slid further down into his blankets, yawning. He drifted slowly back to sleep, his eyes heavy...

There was a tap on his window.

He lifted his head groggily, scratching his head. No... No. It was just the rain... He flopped back down onto his pillow.

A rap at the window, louder this time.

Billy opened his eyes again, unsticking his tongue from the roof of his mouth and sat up. He stood, wobbling groggily and yanked open the window.

“Who—“

“Lemme in, it’s wet out here!” someone hissed.

It was Steve. Billy heard him grappling at the window, trying to come in. Confused but too tired to argue, he reached down and helped him through. Steve got to his feet and shut the window.

“Whew,” he said. “It’s fucking awful out there.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you use the door like a normal person?” Billy croaked. He sat back on his bed.

“Well, see... I tried to call but your Dad answered, and he told me to never call this house again because I was a, and I quote, *‘nosy faggot whose gonna turn my son queer.”*

Billy blinked. Too late, he thought derisively to himself.

“So you decided to come in my window?” Billy asked, keeping his voice down.

“Wasn’t my first choice— No one else is home and you didn’t hear me knocking,” Steve laughed.

“Sorry about the phone, Dad’s pissed off about somethin,’ I dunno...,” Billy said, shrugging. Neil didn’t like Steve, and he hated him even more now that he’d rescued him a few weeks back and escaped his punishment for doing so.

“Whatever” Steve shrugged.

“What time is it?” Billy yawned.

“Uh, half past ten.”

Billy groaned and flopped back onto his bed, curling into it, shoving the blankets up over his head.

“Fuck off...,” he groaned. “Why’re you early?”

“Wow,” Steve snorted. He flopped onto the mattress beside him. “And here I was thinkin’ you’d be all excited.”

“Shh,” Billy hushed. “I’m trying to sleep.”

“Oh, come on,” Steve said, pushing him lightly. “I was gonna come get you at eleven anyways. At this rate I’d be waiting around forever.”

Billy made a disgusted noise in his throat and popped his head from out of the blankets, grimacing. The rain pounded on the window and he closed his eyes. “It’s nasty out,” he complained.

“Well, seeing as you’re not made of sugar, I think you’ll be fine,” Steve said.

“I am,” Billy protested, yawning widely, rubbing his eyes. “I am made of sugar. I’m gonna melt, Harrington. You don’t want that on your conscience...”

“I think somehow I’ll manage,” Steve said briskly, standing up. “Come on.”

“Fine...,” Billy muttered. He sat up, bringing the covers with him, wrapped around his head and shoulders. It was chilly in his room. He got out of bed and went over to his door, opening it and sweeping down the hall toward the bathroom. He let the blanket fall as he took a piss, scratching his chest. He gathered it up again and went to the sink, smacking his lips a few times. He washed his hands, his, face, brushed his teeth and quickly ran a comb through his hair.

He wandered back to his bedroom, exhausted, and flopped back down into bed.

“Seriously?” Steve demanded, bemused. Billy felt his hands hooking themselves around his arms. “Get up, you prick,” Steve grumbled, laughing, yanking on his arms.

“Alright, alright, alright!” Billy yelled, finally giving up. He flung the covers off his shoulders and got out of bed into the cold room, shivering, going to his closet and pulling out a random shirt and a pair of jeans. He shoved them on over his legs and pulled the shirt over his head.

“There,” he said. “I’m up. Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” Steve replied. “You’ll want a coat, it’s pissing out.”

Billy stretched, lifting his hands high up over his head. The skin on his chest and arms had fully healed by this point, but it was uneven and slid across his muscles in a way he wasn’t totally used to yet. He let his arms fall.

“I’m surprised you even wanna try comin’ here, after my Dad went ballistic on you,” Billy snorted softly, going over to his closet and finding his canvas coat. It wasn’t necessarily the best coat to wear in the driving rain, but he didn’t have anything else.

“Whatever,” Steve said flippantly. “I’m not afraid of him.”

Billy slid his coat over his shoulders, flipping his hair over the collar and taking his time adjusting the sleeves. Of course he wouldn’t be afraid of his Dad. A feeling of anger and admiration at Steve’s easy bravery warred in his gut.

“Well— You didn’t have to live with him,” Billy pointed out, keeping his voice calm.

“No, no,” Steve said hastily. “I know. I mean— That was kinda a lie, to be honest... He’s a pretty mean motherfucker, I gotta say. I’m... I guess I’m wary of him. That’d be the word I’d use. Wary.”

“Wary,” Billy repeated, nodding and smirking softly. “Yeah. Me too.”

“You ready?” Steve asked, changing the subject. Billy let him. He didn’t want to talk about his Dad. Since the day Billy had escaped

through the window and he'd tried to yank Steve back through, Neil had been a little bit more careful. Alone in the house, he must have done some thinking about what would happen if Steve told anybody about what he'd done. As much as Billy resented it in a way, Steve did have a lot more power in that regard. Donnie Harrington was a well known and respected person in Hawkins, and his wife Sandra was the glue that kept the community events together. If it came out that Neil Hargrove had hurt there son, well... That would be the end of it.

Neil still insulted him daily, but he'd stopped hitting him. Instead... He'd started drinking. Billy could smell it when he walked through the house, the sour scent wafting from his Dad's clothes. Neil had always been a drinker, but had never been an alcoholic. It seemed something in him had gone over the edge. Billy had had the realization that it was because he knew he was losing control, of his son, of his step daughter, of his wife...

It worried him.

His Dad's behaviour, while terrifying, had always been predictable. It swelled and crested like the tides, sometimes low and calm, and sometimes crashing over them. His Dad's sour breath and the bottles that began to pile up on the back porch ate at him. They added an unstable element to their tense but balanced life, like gasoline on a fire. He and Max watched and listened to this all from across the lines of their bedroom doors, trying to stay out of it, doing their best to stay clear of Neil's path. Billy wondered how long this could go on until something broke.

"Hey, something bothering you?" Steve asked. His hand was grasped in his, walking through the house toward the back kitchen porch— A very brave gesture in Neil Hargrove's house. The rain battered loudly on the peeling paint of the porch and plunked off the tin roof as Steve opened the wooden door.

"No...," Billy sighed. He twisted his lips. "I mean. Yeah."

Billy shrugged. He flipped his collar up against the rain and stepped outside. Steve followed him, closing the door behind them. They made their way quickly down the stairs and across the street, getting

into Steve's car. Billy sat down and shut the passenger side door, wiping his wet hair out of his face.

Beside him, Steve sniffed and started the car.

"You said something was bothering you?" Steve prompted as he shifted gears and drove off down the street.

Billy rubbed his lips uncertainly, his eyebrows furrowed. He let his hands fall.

"Dad's drinking," he said bluntly, shrugging.

"Oh?" Steve asked, sounding concerned.

"Yeah. I dunno, after that weekend last month, he started drinkin' and then he didn't stop. I dunno what the fuck's wrong with him..."

"Has he been... Has he..."

"Hasn't been hittin' me. Susan he slaps sometimes, but... I mean, he's still yelling at me and shit."

"Jesus...," Steve muttered angrily under his breath.

"It is what it is," Billy said, letting out a quiet sigh.

"I hate that it is what it is, for the record," Steve said, laughing sadly. "Just so you know. Seriously, dude, any time you want— Just call me. My parents are literally never fuckin' home and we have tons of extra room."

"I know," Billy mumbled. He felt his cheeks go a little hot. "S'just... Max."

"Max?" Steve repeated.

"Yeah," Billy said roughly, swallowing. "I just... She don't wanna leave Susan."

"Oh," Steve said quietly. "So you... Don't wanna leave her."

"Yeah."

A sad silence reigned in the car.

“Well I fucking hate it, but... I think it’s brave of you to stay and keep her safe,” Steve sighed heavily.

Billy swallowed, his hands wringing in his lap. It wasn’t brave— He just owed it to Max, after everything he hadn’t done for her when he should have to stick by her when she needed him. They drove in silence for a while, the rain pounding heavily on the roof of the car, the windshield wipers swiping manically back and forth across the windshield. In the far distance, Billy could hear a rumble resounding across the land.

“Hey, you wanna, like... Sleep over or somethin’ tonight?” Steve asked him hesitantly. “I know you don’t wanna leave Max alone, but... You’ve been stuck in that house for a long time now, and... You gotta take a break too, right?”

Billy put his head against the headrest, closing his eyes. He wished he didn’t have to always think about Max, think about Susan, think about his Dad and the fact that all his friends were thinking about it too.

“I want to,” he said finally. He really fucking wanted to. He desperately wanted to be able to say Yes to Steve, say he would, promise things and not have to worry about whether he should or not.

“Isn’t there any place Max could stay tonight?” Steve asked.

“All her friends are boys,” Billy sighed. “Y’know how parents are... S’not that Susan or my Dad wouldn’t let her, it’s other parents, you know? The ones that actually give a shit...”

“Would Mrs. Wheeler let her, you think?”

Billy bit his thumb. Would Karen let her? She, Lucas, and the rest of the boys were at her place right now. “I dunno...,” he said. The truth was that he felt like he might explode if he had to spend one more endless night on edge, trying to sleep, waiting for his Dad to finally snap. He’d been on high alert for so long... He was exhausted. He

needed a break... And he had a feeling Max did too. He'd told her to get a lock for her door, from the inside, just in case. She sounded dull and tired when she talked now. They were all just waiting, like people down in a shelter waiting for a tornado to pass over them and rip their lives from the foundations.

"Maybe. I dunno, man..."

"Well. You should at least try, don'tcha think?" Steve asked gently. Billy closed his eyes, his shoulders relaxing. He wondered how someone so kind could want him around. Steve was naive, sure, and maybe a little spoiled— But he was sweet and good, and all he wanted was for him to be happy.

Nobody had wanted him to be happy before.

"Okay," Billy agreed, even though he felt like it was useless, like it wouldn't turn out.

Billy stood in front of the wall before the phone in Mrs. Harrington's kitchen, licked his lips, and picked it up. He dialled the number Max had given him long ago. It rang two times until a breathless voice answered the phone.

" Hello? " Karen asked.

"Hey," Billy said, his mouth dry. He was still nervous to talk to Karen, still upset that he'd almost hurt her, almost taken her away from Nancy, Mike, and Holly. "It's um, it's Billy."

"Oh," she said, sounding surprised and maybe even a little anxious. *"You're probably looking for Max, I'll go get her—"*

"Actually, I need to talk to you," Billy interrupted quickly. "It's... I need to ask you a favour."

"Oh... Oh?"

"Um... Listen. I was wondering if Max could stay at your place tonight. I might not be home, so..."

Billy licked his lips. He had no idea how to tell her what was going on, how to convey that he wasn't just trying to dump his little sister on her. He needed her to know that he was just trying to keep her safe.

"Oh, I see," Karen said, and he couldn't tell if she was annoyed or just confused.

"I..."

Billy closed his eyes.

"My Dad... He's..."

His cheeks flushed red, his skin burning. He had never admitted to an older adult what was going on. His heart slammed against his rib cage so hard it almost hurt, his stomach churning. She wouldn't believe him. Nobody believed him.

"Oh," Karen said, quietly. The way her voice lowered cut through him, like he'd been laid bare as the coward he was.

"I'm sorry, I really shouldn't have asked, don't worry—"

"It's okay, Billy. Really. I... I understand," she said. He found himself both hoping to God and terrified and angry that she might understand. He felt like he was losing control of his life, like the hard and difficult fact of his father's abuse was being pulled from his clutches and he didn't know who he was without it. He squeezed his eyes shut and ploughed through the feeling. His Dad's fists and acid tongue weren't precious— He would cherish them no longer.

"Thank you," he said, relieved. "Can I talk to her for a minute?"

"Of course," Karen said, her voice soft and kind. *"And, Billy... If you need a place to go... Just call, okay?"*

"Okay," he said, overwhelmed, squeezing his eyes shut. "Thank you, Karen."

"I'll go get Max."

There was humming and silence through the phone lines for about a minute until he heard someone pick up.

"Billy?" Max asked, sounding alarmed. He never called her like this.

"Hey," he said roughly, swallowing. "I'm gonna stay at Steve's tonight. Mrs. Wheeler said you can stay at Mike's."

"Oh... Okay," Max said. *"Did... Is everything—"*

"Everything's fine," he said. "I just..."

Something unspoken passed between them.

"I'll come get you, tomorrow afternoon," he said, trying to sound normal, like this was a casual conversation.

"Alright," she agreed quietly. *"Billy?"*

"Yeah?"

"Thanks," she said.

He lifted his head to the ceiling. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you."

The line went dead. He gently put Mrs. Harrington's phone back in its cradle and put his arm up on the wall, leaning his forehead against it, his hair hanging low around his shoulders. He was so relieved... For one night, at least, he could relax. He knew Max was safe, he knew he was safe... He didn't have to worry, didn't have to listen in wait...

"Is everything cool? Can she stay?" Steve asked him. He'd been sitting at the kitchen table the entire phone call, quiet and patient. Billy straightened up and turned around, blinking.

"Yeah," he said. "It's cool. She can stay."

"Oh, that's good," Steve said. He sounded happy.

"Yeah," Billy agreed. His voice conveyed only half of the incredible feeling of relief that was flooding through his body. He let out a little

sigh. “Yeah.”

“Um, how would you feel about Nancy and Robin comin’ over?” Steve asked, standing up.

Billy nodded a little, tilting his head, an ironic smirk on his face. “What, you mean hang out on a Saturday night like normal people?”

“Yeah, you know… I figure we could try it, just for fun,” Steve joked, laughing softly.

“Yeah,” Billy said, crossing his arms. “Yeah, I think that’d be okay. Just for fun.”

Billy drank his beer, slouched down far into the couch cushions in Steve’s basement. He snorted stupidly to himself as a little bit of beer dribbled down his chin. He wiped his face with his sleeve. Steve sat between his legs on the floor, leaning back, his arms lifted, using Billy’s knees like armrests. Beside him, Robin was curled onto his lap, her head facing the TV, Nancy sitting on the couch at her ankles.

“ A hospital?!” the woman on the TV exclaimed, amazed.

“ It’s a large, brick building where sick people go, but that’s not important right now, ” said the doctor, played by Leslie Nielson.

Billy barked with laughter, accidentally spraying Steve with beer.

“Hey, say it, don’t spray it!” Steve yelled, swatting him.

“Shh!” Billy hushed him, ruffling his hair.

“I’ll shh ya,” Steve said.

Billy closed his eyes and listened to the movie, laughing. It was a funny movie he’d never seen, a ridiculous slapstick whose gags Robin was dutifully describing in detail to him. He laid back and let the beer wash over him, trying not to think of anything, letting the warm

room and the laughter of the people who'd still kept being his friends despite everything surround him like a blanket. He felt safe. He knew Max was safe.

The credits rolled and Nancy yawned loudly.

"Oh shit," she said sleepily. "It's almost one in the morning..."

"Fuck, I gotta be at work tomorrow," Robin groaned. He heard them get up.

"You guys going to bed too?" Nancy asked.

Billy shrugged. "Naw," Steve said, we're gonna stay up a little, I think."

"Alright..."

Robin and Nancy said their good nights and went upstairs. Billy smoked a cigarette, lying down on the couch. On the floor, Steve switched the channels and Billy heard David Letterman talking jovially to them across the room. Outside the storm still raged, the glass sliding doors leading out onto the pool patio lashed with heavy rain. Billy paid no attention to the TV, enjoying listening to Steve laugh as he drank his beer instead. Feeling a little buzzed and light, he reached out a hand to see if he could find Steve. His fingers brushed against the back of his t-shirt, and he put his palm across his shoulder. Steve moved closer, leaning against the side of the couch. Billy closed his eyes, polishing off his beer, and was content.

Ten minutes later, he opened his eyes. The ceiling stared back at him, stucco and white, the light from the TV flickering against it in a bluish haze. Billy's eyes widened and he sat straight up, staring ahead. He was on a sofa, brown plaid, a beige carpet on the ground. A wall of shelves loaded with records and a turntable set into the wall sat innocently across from him, their polished wood reflecting the light from the TV and the fireplace in the wall.

"Steve?" he called, his voice low and amazed.

Nothing.

“Steve! Steve, I can see!” he called, a smile cracking onto his face. Oh, thank God... Thank God... Where was Steve? He must have gone out of the room... He stood up from the couch and looked around. Something crackled and he spun around. The TV blinked on and off, David Letterman’s face flickering in and out of existence. Then, the screen warped, hissing, as though a voice was trying to reach him through the tubes.

“Steve!” he called out. The house was deathly silent. He looked at the clock on the mantelpiece above the fireplace. The hands vibrated, stuck at midnight, like they were trying to break free… And the clock was upside down. He looked around the rec room, licking his lips, his palms sweating.

“Steve?” he called again, turning, trying to find him. Something blinked, and he spun around, staring out at the darkness of the pool deck through the sliding glass doors. The outside light against the house flickered, humming and pulsing.

“Steve...,” he whispered. Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong.

The outside light flickered manically once and then winked out. Something red burned above the tall pines that lined the outside of Steve’s backyard. Billy walked forward, sliding the door open, and stepped outside. The air was poison. The world began to swirl, the house and the pool covered in rotting tendrils. A familiar beast of flesh and terrifying darkness drew itself up above the pines, the red sky bloody and screaming. A tornado of choking ash swirled around the treetops and whipped Billy’s hair.

“No...,” he croaked, staring up into the maw of the beast. “No...”

A tendril of sludge-grey flesh slammed itself into the earth, leaning down, coming for him, coming to siphon his body back into its own.

“No!” Billy screamed at it, into the bloody sky. “GET AWAY FROM ME! GET AWAY! GET AWAY!”

The creature descended upon him, a heavy cloak of rotting death. He fell to his knees on the concrete, his eyes wide, screaming, screaming,

as the inky darkness poured down his throat.

“ *NOOOOOO* !”

Steve laughed loudly, shaking his head. He reached forward and grabbed his beer from the coffee table, taking a swig and putting it back down. Billy’s hand had fallen from his shoulder, and he could hear him snoring softly behind him. He watched TV for a little while, and jumped a little when the clock above the mantelpiece chimed two. Behind him, Billy sat up suddenly, as though he had been startled. Steve half turned toward him, yawning and stretching.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” he greeted.

“Steve?” Billy asked. He looked wild, his eyes wide, his mouth agape. Steve turned around giving him a funny look.

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“Steve! Steve, I can see!” Billy exclaimed, amazed.

“What?” Steve choked, his eyes widening. A grin broke out across his face, his heart hammering. How could this be? How could his sight just randomly return? He turned, kneeling, looking up at him.Billy was blinking and wincing, as though the light hurt him, a small, joyful smile on his face. Billy turned to him, grinning. Steve watched in confusion as his face fell, his eyes sliding over him like he wasn’t there.

“Steve!” he called, like he was looking for him.

“I’m right here!”

Billy got off the couch, standing up. Steve stood up with him, his eyebrows furrowing. Steve laughed. “Okay, I get that you think it’s funny that you can’t see and shit, but it’s actually not, shithead,” he chuckled. He watched as Billy’s eyes widened, staring at the clock. Terror crept slowly across his face.

“I’m… I’m right here,” Steve repeated, a little less certain, waving an

arm. “I’m… I’m right in front of you…”

“Steve?” Billy whispered fearfully, his eyes staring straight ahead at the sliding glass doors, looking at them as though something awful and unspeakable lay past them. Billy walked past his hand as it went to reach for him, wandering shakily toward the doors that led to the pool deck and the backyard. He opened them and walked through. Outside, the rain hadn’t let up. It was coming down in droves, the chilly wind blustering through the trees and sloshing the downpour into every crevice. Steve watched in confusion and fear as Billy walked out, barefoot, mindless to the stormy, cold weather raging around him. Steve followed him outside, his socks slapping wetly on the cold concrete. The deck light illuminated Billy from behind as he stared up at the tree line, his chest heaving.

“Billy!” Steve shouted, over the wind, hurrying towards him. “Billy! Come back inside!”

“No...,” he heard Billy moan. “No...”

“Come back in...,” Steve pleaded, reaching for his shoulder. “Please.. You’re freakin’ me out...”

“No!” Billy screamed suddenly, screeching up into the sky. “GET AWAY FROM ME! GET AWAY! GET AWAY!”

Steve jumped away from him, startled, terrified. The wind whipped his hair around his face, already soaking wet. Just in front of him, Billy fell to his knees, his hands flinging to his sides.

“NOOOOOOO!” he screeched, his mouth wide open, his eyes flung open, the rain battering down on his face.

“Billy!” Steve shouted. He was sick, terrified... He flung himself forward, his hands grasping at Billy’s t-shirt. He had no idea what was happening, no idea what to do… Mindlessly, he threw himself down in front of him, falling onto his knees on the soaked concrete and pulled him in, holding him so tightly his arms trembled. The wind was freezing, the rain pounding down icy and hard on his head and the skin of his bare arms. He had no idea how long he sat there, clutched onto Billy, each moment feeling like a thousand years as he

sobbed loudly into the sky. Eventually, after an eternity, Billy suddenly went still.

Billy was freezing. Something was battering on his head, cold water draining across his skin. Then, his heart slammed itself once, twice, three times against his ribcage and he flung his eyes open with a gasp.He saw nothing but darkness. He was soaking wet, almost numb. Something was holding onto him like a vice grip. He gave a strangled yell and tried to wrench himself away, but they only held on tighter. After a few moments, words filtered slowly into his mind.

It was Steve.

“It’s me!” he yelled, desperately. “Billy, it’s me! It’s Steve!”

Billy stilled, his chest heaving. He recognized the tight grip as arms, the solid plane before him as a chest, the tickle on his forehead as hair whipping in the violent wind. He recognized the tendrils on his back as fingers.

“Steve,” Billy gasped. “Steve...”

“It’s me,” Steve yelled above the wind, taking his head and burying it into Billy’s shoulder. “It’s me! It’s Steve!”

Every breath Billy took seemed to take in less and less air. He squeezed his unseeing eyes shut, hot tears leaking down his face.

“Let’s go in!” Steve said, and he felt himself being lifted up to his unsteady feet. They made their way back toward the house, the rain hammering on their backs, and passed the threshold of the door into the warm basement. Billy felt the carpet beneath his feet, the smell of beer and the fire crackling in the fireplace assaulting his nose like a blow to the face. Steve slammed the sliding door shut, panting. All at once, Billy realized what had happened. He hadn’t regained his sight. He hadn’t actually seen the Mind Flayer. He’d had one of his dreams, one of the nightmares that plagued him... Only this time, he had been awake.

This time, someone had been there to see it.

“What the hell was that?” Steve asked, his voice hitching with a note of hysteria.

Billy turned his face away from where he heard Steve’s voice. Hot, uncontrollable tears were leaking down his face in torrents, his breath barely making it into his lungs.

“I...,” he gasped. He didn’t know how to explain to Steve what had happened. If he did, he knew he’d think he was crazy. He was trembling uncontrollably, frozen to the bone, his teeth chattering.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said, the floor creaking as he moved closer, his voice also jittery from the cold. “I didn’t mean... You just scared me...”

Steve’s hands clutched his shoulders.

“Billy... Are you okay?” Steve asked, his teeth chattering, his voice soft and quiet, suffused with a warmth that sent goosebumps down his spine. He felt revolted by himself, disgusted. Every bit of violence that he’d been victim to and every bit of violence he had done hit him all at once like a tidal wave. He was a child of violence and he deserved violence. He did not deserve the hands on his shoulders, or the concern in Steve’s voice. He was just like his father. He was just like Neil. He wasn’t ever going to be better. He was a violent shithead, and for that reason, that creature had chosen him. It knew he wasn’t strong enough to fight it, and it knew that he was full of rage, selfishness and brutality. He felt Steve’s hands touching him, his warm palms grasping him through his soaking t-shirt, and Billy let out a cry of despair that he had been holding in the bottom of his heart for months, or maybe for his whole life. He ground his teeth, groaning with the effort of keeping it together, his face flecked with tears that were so hot they burned. Steve’s hands moved, sliding down to the middle of his back. Then he did something that snapped Billy’s iron will in two as though it were made of brittle kindling.

He drew Billy in close, folding him into his embrace. One hand found the back of Billy’s head and pulled him in, resting the side of his face against his smooth neck, the prickling of his stubble scratching his forehead. In the soft darkness of Steve’s arms Billy felt himself fall into a pit and drown. Almost as if from afar, he felt himself heave, his

entire face screwed up, trying to keep himself together, tears clogging in his throat and choking him. He heard himself let out a few miserable dry sobs that he couldn't stop, and then... It was happening. There was nothing he could do.

He cried. His broad arms wrapped themselves around Steve's lithe upper body, his hands splaying across his back. His mind went blank, and all of the grief and anguish he had kept to himself because he had convinced himself it was queer and weak to feel otherwise came out of him all at once. He had been so unhappy, so sad, so afraid... Eventually, Billy tore himself out of Steve's arms, embarrassed and ashamed, feeling nauseous from his panicked gasping. He wiped his face with his arms and managed to say a few words.

"Fuck... I'm so goddamn weak...," he grunted, his face puffy, gulping down the feeling of vomit creeping up into his throat.

"Weak?" Steve asked softly, in confusion. "What do you mean, weak?"

Billy swallowed. Steve put a firm hand on his shoulders, his palm open and reassuring.

"Dude, 'weak' is a word I would never use to describe you... I mean," Steve chuckled incredulously. "You beat my keg stand record... Kicked my ass at basketball... Kicked my ass in a fight... And not only that, you got possessed by an otherworldly hell creature and you won. You pretty much fought the devil himself and you fucking won. What the hell is weak about that?"

Billy wiped his nose on his sleeve, sniffing loudly, the words Steve was saying filtering slowly into his head.

Did Steve really think that? The thought made his heart jump, but the iron grip of his father's influence quickly rushed in and reminded him that this couldn't be true. He took whatever his Dad dished out, and that creature had known it, had smelt it on him like a bad cologne. He was pathetic.

"I need a cigarette," he gasped, attempting to get his breathing under control, nausea still rolling in his gut.

“Oh, sure man, I’ll get one,” Steve said. “Come here, come sit on the couch…”

Steve grabbed his hand and led him over to the sofa, sitting him down on it. The heat from the fireplace burning in the grate felt almost unbearable to his soaking, freezing skin. He heard some scrabbling around and then Steve took his hand, putting a pack of cigarettes and a lighter into his palm. Shakily, he lit one. He took a few puffs but the smoke was almost overwhelming, and he felt a great wave of sickness come over him. He tried desperately to stop it, but it was too strong.

“Trash can,” he managed to say before he gagged.

He felt Steve scamper, and heard the sound of a plastic bag crinkling as a garbage can was placed in front of him. He grabbed it, stuffing his head into it. He vomited hard, holding onto the trash can with both hands, one still holding his smouldering cigarette. After he was done, he gasped and sputtered, wiping his mouth, spitting into the can. Beside him, Steve made little sounds of sympathy, rubbing his back. Finally feeling as though he’d purged most of the contents of his stomach, Billy leaned his head back, swearing, taking one drag of the cigarette and then licking thumb and index finger and smashing the cherry between them, putting it out and throwing it in the garbage.

“Here, I’ll take that,” Steve said mildly, pulling the can away. He heard him walk away and open the sliding door. The rain and wind whooshed into the room and curled around Billy like a ghostly hand. His mind reeled back to the creature against the bloody sky, the darkness of the warehouse, the sauna, the heat bursting his mind, Max’s cries. He swallowed hard and tried to think of something else.

Steve slammed the sliding door, making him jump. He was shivering uncontrollably.

“Okay,” Steve said, letting out a breath of air. Billy pictured the little piece of hair that you hung over his eyes flickering, and the image grounded him for some reason. “Okay.”

He seemed to be reassuring himself, trying to figure out what to do

next.

“Well. We have to get out of these clothes,” he said. “I’m fucking freezing, I know you are too. And we have to warm up. I don’t wanna be responsible for you gettin’ pneumonia or some shit.”

He paused.

“We’re gonna go upstairs and I’m gonna run the bath in my parents room, since it’s gigantic, and then I’m gonna light a fire in their fireplace and we’re gonna sleep in that bed tonight.”

Steve was talking like he was planning out a strategy at the halftime buzzer of an important basketball game with another school. Colder than he had ever been in his entire life, nauseous, terrified, and feeling like he was losing his mind, Billy felt himself let out a loud snort of laughter that came from somewhere between exhaustion and sheer hysteria.

“What’s so funny?” Steve asked him.

“Nothing at all,” Billy said, equally surprised at his own bizarre reaction.

Steve came over and sat down beside him, his weight compressing the couch cushions they’d thrown onto the floor. Steve tapped him with a beer bottle, the liquid sloshing inside the glass, and he took it. He drank from it, guzzling it down. It was warm as hell, and they both smacked their lips and made noises of distaste as they drained them. When they were done, Steve took away the bottles and put them on the coffee table.

“You said you kept seeing stuff again... So that was probably what that was,” Steve said, after a moment of silence.

Billy clenched his jaw. “Yeah,” he muttered.

“Maybe it’s like... Like shell shock? You know, the kind of stuff that people in war get? My grandpa Dickie has that. Says he sees stuff again when he’s awake sometimes...”

Billy blinked, swallowing. “If you wanna just take me home, you

can," he said quietly. "I... That was a lot."

"I mean... To be honest, it wasn't *that* bad…," Steve said, punching Billy gently on the arm. "I'd say on a scale of *funny* to *peed my pants* , it was like a seven... And it was only a seven 'cause I care about you."

Billy let out a small snort and a quick smile despite himself. Jesus Christ... Only Steve. He felt a little flicker of warmth for him come stealing into his heart unbidden. Other than Harley, who he had pushed away, he had never had someone like Steve, someone who held on no matter what fucked up shit went on. Overcome with emotions that he couldn't express, he reached out and put a hand on Steve's thigh, clutching it. Steve let out a small breath of laughter and reached forward, rubbing his back.

Billy's thoughts briefly flicked to his father, worrying about what he would say about all this. He knew the exact words that he would fling his way if he discovered them sitting like this, comforting one another. He would call him a sissy, a freak, a faggot... He knew Neil hated Steve, was jealous of Steve, despised his open and honest face, his stupid hair, his expensive clothes. Billy's mind flashed to Steve's fist smashing into his face, the way he had stood up for Max and her friends, how he now knew he was protecting them with his life. He saw him heartbroken in the shower, the tears he tried to hide sliding down his face in the stream of the water. Billy had the realization that it wouldn't matter what Steve did; there was nothing that Steve could ever do to make Neil like him, because Neil thought that Steve was weak.

There was nothing Billy could ever do for his Dad to like him, either.

He would never be good enough for his father. Despite how much he hated him, wanted him dead, wanted him to leave and never come back... He had still wanted his approval. He wanted Neil to be proud of him. The realization that this would never happen felt like a bandaid had been ripped off of an infectious wound festering in his flesh. His Dad knew, deep down, what Billy really was. His Dad was afraid, afraid about what it said about him, afraid of what other people would think.

He was a coward.

Billy knew that he was a coward too because cowards bred cowards... But he wanted to be brave, so very badly. Steve thought he was brave... He had said it with so much conviction that Billy wanted to believe him, to prove him right. Maybe he had begun to be brave, to be open, and hadn't noticed it. He schooled his expression less and less around Steve as the months went on. He started to reach for him, to touch his shoulders, his thigh, to splay his hand across the middle of Steve's back whenever he got the chance. He had decided to let Steve in. Steve had wandered into the darkest recesses of his troubles with a burning fire and a fearless heart. He did not shy away, like Billy had expected him to. Instead, Billy was rewarded with Steve's trust.

It was true that he had no idea what Steve felt about him, not really; Billy had no idea if he was even able to feel the same way that Billy felt. However, the chasm of fear that had held him back could hold him back no longer. A tiny part of him wanted to believe that Steve sensed how he felt, and felt the same way too.

"Alright," he said quietly, a little hopeful fire burning inside. "I think I'd like that bath now."

Steve led him upstairs, bringing him to his bedroom. Steve rummaged in his closet and handed him a pair of shorts. Standing in the doorway of Steve's bedroom, blind, his eyes puffy from sobbing, he lifted his head, a small devilish smile on his lips. He could hear Steve changing, the swish of his clothes as he pulled them off of his body.

"Did I mention I got my sight back for real?"

He heard Steve stumble and fall over, knocking something off of a shelf. It thunked loudly to the carpeted floor. A laugh erupted in his belly and exploded onto his face.

"I'm just kidding," he assured Steve through his smirk. "Still blind as a fuckin' bat. I promise."

"Jesus Christ, Billy," Steve sputtered. He could almost hear him raking a hand through his hair. He pictured Steve's face in his mind's eye, the little cowlick on his hairline, his straight nose. He had never

seen his cheeks flushed with embarrassment, and wondered if his neck got flushed too.

“What, like we didn’t shower together in gym all last year?” Billy snorted.

“I mean... I guess so,” Steve said, chuckling in a confused sort of way.

Steve led him through his parents bedroom and into their gigantic bathroom. He heard the tap squeaking as Steve turned on the water, the spray hitting the tub and echoing off the walls and the ceramic tile floor beneath his bare feet.

“Describe it to me, Harrington,” he asked.

Steve let out a little laugh.

“Well,” he began. “You’re in a room that has twelve foot ceilings, painted white, some of the exposed wood of the house beams showing. There’s a big window overlooking the backyard. A toilet over in a corner, a big jacuzzi tub set into the tile floor. To your right, there’s a long counter with his-n-hers sinks, and a small stand up shower to your left. There’s also a weirdly sexual giant painting on the wall that has disturbed me ever since I was a kid.” He chuckled. “And you, my friend, are the first to know that.”

“I mean... if I were rich like your parents...,” Billy smirked, trailing off.

Steve made a noise in his throat. “Don’t even go there, man.”

Billy lifted a complacent hand. “Fair enough.”

They were silent for a while, the tub filling slowly.

“Well!” Steve said, clapping his hands together. “Almost done. I can just uh, turn around if you want to change, or—“

Billy shrugged and stripped, pulling his shirt over his head and tossing it casually behind him. He unbuttoned the front of his jeans, sliding them down and kicking them away.

“Okay, or just—“

In his Calvins, Billy quirked an eyebrow toward where he guessed Steve might have been, and slid his hands under the waistband, pulling them down, sliding them off his thighs and shoving them to the side with his foot.

“Yep, okay,” Steve muttered, and he heard frantic splashing as he turned away. “I’ll just uh... I’ll put the bubbles in.”

For some reason, he found Steve’s sudden bashfulness charming. He was acting like a virgin nun having to walk by a nudist beach, which he thought was hilarious considering he had claimed the title of Hawkins’ playboy for almost his entire high school career. He listened to the splashing for a while, not bothering to put on the shorts Steve had given him. He’d just have to peel them off later. His hands roved over his chest, his arms, his thighs. He felt the uneven skin, the thick scars coiling on his flesh like rope. He bit his lip. Maybe he *should* put something on… He was just about to bend down and grab his clothes again when Steve made a noise of surprise.

“Okay, it’s almost—What the fuck, Billy!”

“What?” Billy shrugged. He closed his eyes. The scars must have been pretty bad…

“Whass goin’ on?” a sleepy voice asked behind them. It was Robin.

Billy turned around at the sound of her voice. Behind him Steve made an odd noise. There was a pregnant pause.

“Billy,” she began. “I would ask why you’re naked, but I’ve decided I don’t actually want to know.”

“Billy’s gonna take a bath,” Steve interjected quickly. “Uh, he got sick.”

Billy felt a rush of affection for Steve. The bedroom the girls had been sleeping in was to the front of the house, and the wind and rain must have been loud enough that they didn’t hear him screaming into the sky. Steve was covering for him. He forced himself to stand tall, casual, even though Steve and Robin seeing the remnants of his torn

flesh made him want to crawl away in shame and embarrassment.

“And... You’re gonna take a bath with him?” Robin asked, a small confused laugh tilting the edges of her voice.

“Uh, yeah, you know. He might, um…,” Steve cleared his throat. “Slip.”

Robin said nothing for several moments. Then she leaned forward and patted him on the shoulder.

“Okay, Billy boy,” she said, a small smile on her face. “Have fun. I’m going to go escape this sausage party and get back to bed.”

“Night!” Steve called out. He sounded like he was desperately trying to be casual.

Billy felt Robin’s breath in his air.

“Smooth,” she murmured, before he heard her walk across the shag carpet toward the hallway. She closed the door behind her.

Billy turned back to Steve. “Hey Stevie,” he said lightly. “Aren’t bubbles a bad idea in a tub like that?”

Steve paused.

“Oh shit!” he swore. Billy heard him scrambling on the tile, scooping bubbles from the tub and running over to the stand up shower. Billy snorted. He spent many hours a day wishing for his sight back, but now he wished more than ever that his vision would return. He so badly wanted to see Steve, a bashful mess running around his parent’s opulent bathroom in panic. He wanted to see that lock of hair in front of his eyes. Steve was such an expressive person. He grieved the fact that he hadn’t been in the right place to enjoy it while he had been able to.

“Alright, well... Fuck,” Steve said, exasperated. “Half the bathroom is covered in fucking bubbles...”

Billy blinked his eyes and laughed, the sound coming up from somewhere deep inside him, a genuine laugh, a laugh that shattered

his self-deprecating thoughts. Steve seemed to summon this laughter as easily as breathing. Billy realized, offhand, that while he had experienced more confusion and terror in the last year in the dreams and episodes like the one had gone through that day, he had also spent more time laughing in the last few months than he had ever done. Sometimes when Steve dropped him off, his face hurt from smiling, something that he had never experienced in his entire life.

“Man,” Billy said, calling back to when he had taught Steve to drive stick, a laugh still sparkling in his voice. “You’re really bad at this.”

He heard Steve let out a small snort of laughter.

“Yeah,” he said, practically gleeful, repeating their inside joke back to him. “I’m just really, really bad.”

Steve chortled, crouched beside the tub, and looked up into Billy’s face. A veritable mountain of bubbles popped and fizzed beside him. Billy’s face had split into a toothy grin, his eyes scrunched together, his cheeks flush with the humidity in the room. His hair was plastered to his forehead, his eyes rimmed in red, naked and shivering uncontrollably... He looked a mess, but the dazzling and happy grin that burst across his face made him somehow more handsome than he had ever been before, which was saying something. Steve had been pleased to learn that Billy’s real smile was slightly crooked, and that his thick eyelashes crinkled together in a very sweet kind of way when he laughed, when he *really* laughed. He had seen this expression before, more and more as the months wore on, but it had never, ever been directed solely at him. This time, Billy was smiling like that for nobody else, just for him. It made him feel proud and inexplicably lighter, as though the mere act of enjoying Billy’s smile straightened his spine and cleared his head. His eyes flitted across his naked body, and he tried to keep his curiosity in check— but every time he glanced back down at the tub his eyes began to inevitably drift back to Billy.

So he looked.

He had seen other guys before. Of course he had— He’d played sports for years, shared showers, saunas... On a certain level he knew the

strange dance of locker room shenanigans was simultaneously homophobic and homoerotic, always toeing the line between was was considered queer and what was considered boys just being boys. The boys that Steve had grown up with were no exception. He remembered Tommy whipping his towel down, and him pulling Tommy's towel down right back. The act of looking but not looking, knowing what your buddy's dick looked like but never, ever talking about it.

Billy was sculpted like some kind of statue and Steve felt simultaneously impressed and jealous. His thighs were thick, muscled — But he knew that already. His jeans didn't leave much to the imagination there. His chest was chiseled. Steve's eyes alighted on the massive scar in his abdomen and swallowed. It was uneven and mottled, purple and pink flesh crossing itself unevenly across where the wound had been, like his skin was trying to lash down precious cargo in a high wind. He could see where the doctors had stapled him shut here, stitched him there. His arms were equally scarred, covered in white lesions that covered his flesh like a complex road system. Steve clenched his jaw, witnessing the physical evidence of the panic and terror that Billy had succumbed to earlier in the basement. He continued his inspection, trying to look away from the horrific scars the Mind Flayer had left behind. Billy had a subtle treasure trail that led from his belly button all the way down to...

Steve blinked. Alright then.

Steve wasn't insecure— He didn't need to be. He was perfectly happy with what he had. Billy was... Well. He was something. He suddenly became acutely aware that Billy was still standing there, shivering a little, and jumped out of his reverie into action. He walked the short distance across the tile floor and took Billy's hand in his own, leading him toward the tub. He stepped down into it, the bubbles reaching up to his chest, and coaxed Billy down into it. He seemed uncertain, the combination of slippery tile and unfamiliar territory putting him off. Billy sat. The bubbles oozed around him and he sniffed, a small smile still on his face, wiping some of them away. Steve clambered out of the tub, walking toward the tape deck on the bathroom counter.

"Okay, let's get some jams goin' here," he called out, grinning goofily. "I know Dad has a mini fridge under here too..."

He opened the cupboard and hit pay dirt, his father's small fridge hidden under the counter fully stocked with beer.

“You’re like a suburban mom, Harrington,” Billy snorted. Steve stopped dead. He’d been unconsciously doing a little boogie he’d seen his Mom do when bouncing around the kitchen.

“Shut up,” he grumbled, digging in the mini fridge. Then he spied it — Up on a shelf, beside the mirror, sort of hidden from view.

A bottle of *Johnny Walker* shined from above.

Steve knew this bottle. It had been hanging around his house for as long as he could remember. The bottle was dusty, forgotten. He grinned. His Dad could always buy another one.

He closed the fridge and reached up, grabbing it.

“Okay, you’re gonna love this,” Steve said, walking over through the sea of bubbles toward Billy.

He opened the bottle with some difficulty, but managed to eventually get it open. He knelt beside Billy, who had his head leaning against the side of the tub, his eyes relaxed and sleepy, steam from the tub wetting his hair.

“Smell.”

“It better not be a fucking fart,” Billy snorted.

“No, it’s not. I promise.”

He swished the bottle slowly under Billy’s nose. His brow furrowed. “Whisky?”

“Scotch,” Steve corrected. “1965.”

Steve had a vague recollection that 1965 was the year his parents married, but he shrugged and pushed the thought aside.

“Here,” he said, putting the bottle in Billy’s hands. “Drink. I’ll get some tunes going. We’ll chill and get wasted and then stagger off to

bed like the super tough manly guys we are."

Steve ran over to the tape deck, switching it on.

" YOOOU MAKE MEEE FEEEL LIKE A NAAAATURAAAL WOOOMMAAAN !" Aretha Franklin sang, the volume of the tape deck set on high, her voice echoing off the walls. In the tub, Billy leaned his head back and howled with laughter as Steve fought with the radio. He turned it down to a respectable level and flicked through stations until a late night broadcast out of Indianapolis caught his ear. It was playing some soft rock, and he heard Fleetwood Mac plucking out *Blue Letter* .

"You know your parents fucked to that," Billy said bluntly. Steve let out a long suffering sigh and finally got into the tub, sinking down into the warm depths of the water, the bubbles popping in his ears. He sat across from Billy, who was still holding the bottle.

"Go ahead, man, drink," Steve urged. Billy blinked.

He held up the bottle.

"To Steve Harrington," he said, his voice quiet and suddenly serious. "A pair of eyes I trust better than my own."

He took a long swig.

Across from him, Steve felt his cheeks burn. What did he mean by that, 'eyes that he trusted better than his own?' Sometimes the way Billy pretended to be a cliche of masculinity and bad pickup lines annoyed him, because then sometimes he'd turn around and speak cryptically, almost poetically, skirting around what he was actually trying to say. Steve had never been good at English literature, and he had certainly never understood poetry. Instead of asking what he meant, he stayed quiet, taking the bottle that Billy offered him.He drank. The Scotch was delicious and overpowering. It swirled on his tongue like syrup, potent and rich. He felt as though he'd been punched in the jaw after just a few gulps.

"Describe that disturbing painting to me," Billy said, a smile on his face, taking the bottle from Steve and taking a sip.

Steve half turned in the tub, staring up at it. It was a square thing, encased in a thin silver frame and covered with glass. The painting was a mess of red swatches, an abstract piece his parents had gotten from some well-to-do guy in upper management out of the New York branch of BMW as a wedding gift.

“Well, technically I guess it’s like an abstract painting? It’s got a yellow background with random strokes of red on it. But, you know how you can see shapes in clouds but it’s just a cloud?”

Billy nodded. “I always thought this painting looked straight up like a guy holding his dick.”

Billy took a decisive swig, swallowing and making a satisfied ‘ahh’ He held out the bottle for Steve to take.

“That’s the funny thing with clouds, Amigo,” Billy said lowly, a mischievous smirk on his face. “You see whatever you wanna see,”

Steve turned around, facing Billy, and snatched the bottle out of his hand. He took a couple swings and then stood up, yanking his shorts down and chucking them across the room. Billy tilted his head at the sound of the wet swim trunks hitting the tile floor.

Steve didn’t know why he had bothered to put them on in the first place. Habit really. Despite the locker room shenanigans, he and every other boy he’d grown up with had been, at their heart, insecure about their bodies. He definitely felt a little weird about it, but seeing as the situation wasn’t getting any straighter, he figured he might as well put his whole chest into it and ditch the shorts. They were still two young guys sitting mere feet away in a hot tub sharing a bottle of expensive whisky to the dulcet tones of Todd Rundgren— Tommy slapping his bare ass with a towel had nothing on this.

Billy didn’t say anything, but his smirk said it all. Steve was somewhat impressed with his ability to bounce back. He knew it was probably because, on a certain level, he was embarrassed. He was always embarrassed after he expressed himself in any way, reverting flawlessly back to a cocky, devil-may-care attitude, trying to make up for it. Steve thought that maybe this time was a little different somehow. Billy seemed somehow a little more genuine. He took

another long drink, staring at the tiny gold disk that perpetually hung around a long chain on his neck. As he passed the bottle back to him, he reached out and gently took the disk in his hand. It was hard to tell what had been embossed there at one time, but it seemed like it might have been some sort of religious figure.

“What’s on your necklace, anyways? You never take it off...,” he asked curiously, flipping it over.

“Oh. S’the Virgin Mary,” Billy shrugged, taking a swig. “Was my Mom’s.”

“Oh,” Steve said, putting the necklace back down onto his chest and leaning back. “Sorry. Those things are trendy right now, so I didn’t think...”

“I know,” Billy chuckled lowly. “Weird, huh? I’ve been wearing this since I was eight. Suddenly everyone was wearin’ one...”

“You trendsetter,” Steve smiled, taking the bottle back from him. “I got somethin’ like that,” he continued. “My watch. It’s sort of an heirloom. It was my grandpa’s. The strap isn’t original, but the watch itself is.”

“I like that watch,” Billy nodded. “I noticed it on you before.”

“Yeah?” Steve smiled.

“Yeah,” Billy said, clearing his throat. He leaned his head against the side of the tub.

Steve was always taken aback at how observant Billy was. It was one of his quieter qualities, one that wasn’t necessarily obvious. Every time he was around Billy, he felt like he was glimpsing a shadow moving behind a curtain, catching glimmers of who Billy wanted to be behind the cloak of who he’d been forced to be to survive. Sometimes, those curtains would flutter open and he would see something new; his attention to detail, his thoughtfulness, his sharp mind, his artistic way of speaking… Steve could tell he was a deep thinker, even though he tended to keep those thoughts to himself. A few precious times he had shared his thoughts, Steve had felt like

Billy had handed him a flame, something warm and exciting flickering between them.

“Where do you think we go after we die?” Steve asked him, taking a drink.

Billy blinked, a smirk on his lips, an incredulous quirk in his eyebrows.

“Where the fuck did that come from?”

“I dunno,” Steve said, shrugging, his face flushing. He took a smaller swig of the scotch this time, trying to pace himself. Maybe he was a little more drunk than he thought.

“Well... I guess I did kick the bucket for a hot second there,” Billy snorted.

“Yeah,” Steve said, smiling uncomfortably. He had no idea if Billy knew it had been him who had tried to get to him to breathe again, and against all odds succeeded.

“I didn’t see anything, for the record,” Billy said, waving his hand at Steve, asking for the bottle. “I just remember everything going dark, and then I woke up and I was alive.”

“Huh,” Steve said, passing him the bottle. “No choir of angels or a bright light?”

“Like it’d be angels,” Billy said, shaking his head, smirking around the mouth of the bottle as he drank, his eyes glinting. “Try a screaming army of demons...”

“Yeah, you’d be coming home to take your place on the throne,” Steve grinned, and Billy threw his head back and laughed.

Steve laughed too, his eyes roving over Billy’s face, the way his whole countenance was transformed when he smiled. He took the bottle back from Billy and had the thought that his lips seemed to look softer than usual, somehow more pink... Steve blinked and looked away.

He took a very long drink.

Billy and Steve were very drunk, laughing. Billy belched loudly, chucking a beer can across the room. It clattered onto the floor. He stood up in the tub, smiling and giggling to himself, naked and covered in bubbles. Steve watched him move, leaning sloppily on the side of the tub. He chugged his beer and threw it. It landed next to Billy's discarded can in the pile of discarded cans that had stacked up in the corner. Thoughts drifted peacefully through Steve's mind as music played gently from the tape deck. Billy, finally making it out of the tub, staggered over to the wall by the door.

"Where's th'fuckin' toilet!," he called out.

"Right," Steve called back. "Right s'more."

Billy pawed out and found the toilet. He took a leak, and maybe he missed a little. Steve cackled, finding that really, really funny.

"Nice ass," he said. Maybe he yelled. Oh well.

"Thenks... I grew it m'self," Billy replied, giggling inanely, turning around and staggering a little. "M'gonna... Go t'bed..."

He suddenly froze, standing comically still, putting his arms out.

"Wait! I don' wanna fall oh-fer into th'tub, Stevie Steve...Steven-Steve-o..."

"M'gonna go t'bed too, iss... Late," Steve agreed, feeling like there were marbles in his mouth, getting up out of the bubbles. The bathroom seemed really fucking bright. He made his slow, cumbersome way to the towel rack. He grabbed two, wrapping one around himself and walking over to Billy, who was still standing, swaying, his arms out. Steve put the big fluffy towel over Billy's head like a shawl, roughly drying his long hair. Billy closed his eyes, grinning from ear to ear. Steve felt a warm bubbling laugh erupting in his belly and onto his face. They howled, giggling uncontrollably, neither completely sure why.

Billy took the towel from him and rubbed himself down, then put it

over his shoulders like a blanket.

“Come on, Wet Willy,” Steve chortled, taking Billy’s hand and walking into the master bedroom. He led him to the side of the bed.

Billy’s foot found the edge of the bed very suddenly and he went tumbling forward into it, face down into the cool, garishly purple duvet. The towel managed to cover his head and torso but was just short of covering his ass. Steve pointed at him and wheezed, barely able to speak.

“Your buuuuutt!” he wheezed.

Billy giggled into the duvet and rolled over, throwing the towel onto the floor. Steve thought he looked like an old statue or something, lounging on the bed naked like that. He told him so, and Billy grinned, his eyes closing.

“Here I’ll tuck ya in,” Steve snorted, throwing his towel across the room and staggering over to the side of the bed where Billy was lounging. He rolled Billy over, who groaned jokingly in protest, grinning very obviously, and pulled open the blankets. He threw the covers over Billy’s bottom half and giggled as he made a big show of tucking the blankets underneath his legs.

“Tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck...,” he said happily to himself as he arranged the blankets.

“Mmmmmmm,” Billy replied, his milky eyes half open, shuffling himself down into the blankets.

Steve went to the other side of the bed and flung open the covers, burying Billy’s face beneath them for a moment.

“Hey!” Billy said, snorting with laughter, muffled beneath the comforter.

Steve slid into bed and pulled the blankets up to his chin, turning on his side and looking at Billy, curling his legs up beneath him. The bath had been so refreshing and warm, and the booze was so silky, and the room was so nice and dark, and Billy was there and he was smiling, and turning his head to look at him, and he was just so

blessed to have someone like him...

Steve didn't know it but his eyes had closed. He knew this because they flung open a few seconds later when he felt warm, alcohol-tinged breath on his face, and then, a soft, warm, sweet pair of lips gently placing themselves on his forehead.

He didn't move. He felt his heart beating faster, smelling Billy's cologne and feeling Billy's stubble on his brow. Maybe Billy sensed that Steve's eyes has opened, or maybe he had felt Steve's eyelashes fluttering on his neck, but he pulled away, laying his head on the pillow next to him, facing him, his cheeks flushed and bright, backlit from the red numbers blazing on the radio alarm clock on the night stand behind him.

"Thank you," Billy whispered. Beneath the sheets, he felt a tentative hand reaching or him. Steve slid his palm across the sheets, his fingers finding Billy's.

Billy turned away, on his back, closing his eyes, and Steve laced their fingers together beneath the covers. As Billy's breath evened out, and his own eyelids fluttered closed, he spoke.

"You're welcome..."

Steve woke up with puke already spewing into his mouth. He choked and rolled over, grabbing blindly for the trash can he kept by his bed, but couldn't find it. He scrabbled around, opening his eyes and realizing he wasn't in his bedroom. He sprang from bed and scampered to the bathroom, flinging himself onto his knees and clutching the toilet seat. He heaved, his stomach roiling painfully. He shivered through bouts of sickness, aware that he was completely naked and only having half a recollection as to why. The tile of the bathroom was frigid. He was just gagging when he heard someone else fling up from the bed and walk quickly across the carpet.

"Sink," Steve managed, before his guts exited through his mouth. He heard gagging and a splatter that announced the other person had found the sink.

Steve spat, clearing his nose, breathing deeply, trying to keep the contents of his stomach down. He cast a bleary eye to his left and saw a bare ass and a set of broad, muscular shoulders poised against the bathroom counter, heaving into the Hers portion of the His-N-Hers sinks.

Smatterings of the night before came floating back to him; hanging with the girls, watching a movie, drinking a little... Billy screaming... The bath... His father's scotch...

His father's scotch... That would do it.

Steve pawed at the flush handle and sat back, shivering, wiping his mouth. He got up slowly and staggered to the His sink, spitting, grabbing his Dad's mouthwash and taking multiple swigs. Beside him, Billy turned on the tap, trying to wash down what he'd thrown up. Billy's head lifted, and he looked sweaty and pale.

"That's you, right, Harrington?"

"Yeah," Steve croaked. A god awful headache was blooming behind his eyes the longer his eyes stayed open. "Mouth wash?"

"Yeah…"

They both cleaned themselves as best they could, groaning and wincing against the cold in the room. Eventually, they staggered back into Steve's parents' room, curling back under the covers. The grey light of the cloudy morning came peeking through the slats in the blinds, but Steve ignored it.

"God… Did we really drink that whole fuckin' bottle?" Steve moaned.

"Mhm," Billy mumbled. "And that entire fuckin' fridge of beer…"

"'Liquor before beer, you're in the clear,'" Steve repeated. "What horse shit…"
Steve closed his eyes, Billy's small breaths tickling his hair. His head felt like a dump truck had run over it. Beside him, Billy was clammy, dark circles under his eyes, his hair mussed.

Steve's eyes were fluttering closed, Billy's small breaths tickling his hair. His head felt like

"You alright?" Steve asked him, his voice muffled from being half squashed into the pillow.

"Yeah. I'm okay. You?" Billy asked, his eyes closed. A little piece of something dubious was sticking in the corner of his mouth and Steve reached out a finger, rubbing it away. His lips were soft.

"You had vom in your stache," Steve informed him.

"You're always takin' care of me," Billy snorted.

"Yeah... Someone's gotta," Steve said, smiling, his eyes closing.

He felt a short breath on his face as Billy laughed lightly.

Steve fell asleep. As he drifted, he could have sworn he remembered that Billy had kissed him on the forehead… But then again, they'd been very drunk.

He'd probably imagined it.

11. "Kiss Off" - Violent Femmes (1983)

April 5th, 1986

Billy knelt by the back door, sliding on his boots and flipping his hair over the collar of his jacket. He adjusted the hem of his jeans and stood up, stretching.

“Excuse me, where the hell are you going?” Neil called out angrily from the living room. Billy jumped, startled. He heard Max striding into the kitchen.

“I’m going out!” Max yelled back at him, annoyed.

“No, you’re not!”

Billy heard the sound of Neil leaping up from his chair, the metal and springs creaking. Billy tensed, his boots thumping across the floor toward them in the kitchen. They stopped.

“You were supposed to do the dishes before your mother gets home!” Neil snarled.

“I *did* do the dishes!” Max growled.

“Then what the hell is this, then?” Neil hissed. The sound of a plate clattering on the counter echoed in the room.

“That wasn’t there when I did the dishes earlier,” Max snipped sarcastically.

“And where exactly is it that you’re going?” Neil asked, his voice low and deadly. Billy’s nostrils flared. He could smell liquor wafting strongly from him in the short distance across the linoleum floor.

“Just to hang out with friends,” Max bit.

“Don’t think I don’t know about that little boyfriend of yours, Maxine,” Neil bellowed after her. The back door opened and slammed, her sneakers pounding on the wooden stairs as she left. Billy felt his Dad’s eyes boring holes into him.

“What?” Neil demanded angrily. “You just gonna stand there and stare like a retard?”

“That was my plate, Dad,” Billy grumbled. “She did wash the dishes, I heard her.”

Neil said nothing, breathing heavily. Billy heard a car horn beep outside and recognized it as Steve’s car. He let out a snort of annoyance and turned around, pushing the metal storm door open.

“Both of you are gonna learn some goddamn respect one of these days, do you understand me?” Neil barked viciously.

Billy paused, his foot halfway out the door. He ground his teeth and then set off, letting the storm door slam behind him and striding down the steps and away from the house. He was so angry, so irritated… They hadn’t had a moment's peace in months. He stopped short at the bottom of the stairs and heard Steve’s sneakers on the walk as he came up to greet him.

“Hey!” Steve called, hooking his arm through his own.

“Hey,” he said shortly.

Steve was silent, leading him to the passenger side door of his car. Billy got inside, leaning his head back against the seat. Steve got in the driver’s side and started the engine. They idled for a moment as Steve fiddled with the radio.

“Are you okay, man?” Steve asked eventually. He put a hand on Billy’s knee. Billy closed his eyes, shaking his head gently.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” he said heavily. “Let’s just… Let’s just go somewhere. Do something… Anything.”

“Okay,” Steve replied. He shifted into drive and they took off. Billy lit a cigarette and breathed in, lost in thought.

Billy and Steve walked arm in arm, meandering down Main Street.

The dark sky promised rain, but it hadn't yet made good on that promise. There was an earthy smell in the air, the damp ground ready to burst into green, the trees poised to unfurl budding leaves, the purple and pink lupines and the white Queen Anne's lace that swayed by the roadsides in summer reaching up to the sky from beneath the yellow stalks and rattling seed pods of last year's flowers. The street was busy with people, men in smart suits walking the streets toward the mayor's office, the sheriff's department, the courthouse, the businesses that lined the street. Women in pantsuits and white heels clicked by, their permed hair blowing in the chilly breeze.

The untimely collapse and closure of the Starcourt Mall had caused an unprecedented burst of growth back into the town centre, the death of the mall breathing life into the old fashioned storefronts. A few stores had moved back to their old locations, like the Radio Shack and the Sam Goody's, and a few of the older spots, such as Melvald's and The Hawk Theatre that had been standing since the 1940s became essential Hawkins businesses once again. It was ironic, really. Hawkins had always seemed impossibly quaint in a world where everything was becoming commercialized and picking up speed— And, with the help of the Upside Down, it had somehow managed to resist the pull of the future, destroying it in one fell swoop. Sometimes Steve felt like his hometown lived in a strange bubble that existed outside of regular space and time... And he supposed, considering what had happened and what he had seen, he would probably be right.

"You hungry?" Steve asked, looking over to Billy, whose eyes were closed, his brows furrowed. He noticed that Billy tended to do that when they were walking together, especially if it was a little cold. There was no point in keeping them open against the frigid wind.

"Mm," Billy hummed. "I got no money."

"That's fine," Steve shrugged. "I don't mind."

"I don't wanna make you pay for me all the time," Billy said, flipping his hair out of his eyes.

"Oh, stop," Steve snorted, rolling his eyes. "Don't even start with that

‘ *oh, don’t do nice things for me’* crap. I got money, I don’t mind.”

“Fine…,” Billy sighed. “Whatever, Harrington.”

He’d been in a sombre mood since he’d come out of the house, something obviously preying on his mind. He didn’t have to guess to figure out what the problem was. Every time they hung out, which was now almost as often as Steve could manage, Neil always managed to do something that pissed Billy off or made him upset. It seemed like the incidents were ramping up. Or, at least, Billy was having a harder and harder time brushing them off, almost like they bothered him more than they used to. Steve knew that Billy had known all along his Dad’s behaviour was wrong, but maybe other people knowing about it and seeing it for themselves made him look at it differently. The confidential contract of pain between him and his Dad had been broken, and now that he was free of it, he seemed to become more and more aware that it couldn’t continue the way it had for so long.

Steve sighed lightly and steered them toward a cafe that sat at the midway point on Main Street. It was called George’s Place, a greasy spoon that had been there for so long he was sure that it had appeared one day like a wildflower and the town had dutifully built itself around it. He didn’t feel like having to deal with Carole at the Denny’s today, who had seemed particularly desperate the last time he’d gone there with Billy, Robin, and Nancy. Clearly she was having a rough go, her plan of dumping Tommy and getting with Billy not coming to any fruition. He honestly felt a little bad for her.

They went into the restaurant. An old couple sat in a booth by the window, and another older gentleman was sitting at the back, sipping at a coffee and flicking a newspaper. A lady poked her head out of a kitchen door behind the counter as the bell jingled above their heads, the glass door closing shut at their backs.

“Sit anywhere!” she called cheerfully. “I’ll be over!”

Steve looked around and saw a booth on the other side of the door, beside the window that looked out onto the street. They made their way to it and Billy kicked his boot out, finding the bench and sitting

down, sliding down the brown vinyl seating. Steve was impressed, like he always was, at how adept Billy had become at finding his way. He seemed to have a very good sense of space to begin with, something that Steve certainly didn't have. He was sure that if it had been him who'd been blinded, he would have had to wear a foam suit so he wouldn't smack into every object he came near. He slid in the booth across from Billy.

Billy nonchalantly lit a cigarette, and Steve dutifully slid the glass ashtray over to him.

"Thanks," he said, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

The lady who had called to them bustled over and took their orders. Billy got a black coffee and some eggs and Steve got a sandwich. She came over after a few minutes and plunked the food down in front of them. They ate quietly, slowly. Gentle music was playing over the speakers and Steve stopped chewing his sandwich to listen, but he couldn't make it out. He put down his sandwich and took a sip of coffee, looking at Billy.

He was looking physically much better than he had been in the fall. He'd been a lot thinner during the winter than usual, still slowly healing from his wounds. Now almost completely healed, he was starting to gain the muscle and fat back that he had lost. He watched as he brushed his bangs out of his eyes, making a face. His hair was getting very long, and now hung past his shoulders, his bangs unruly on his forehead.

"You want a haircut?" Steve chuckled. "Your hair's gettin' a little long... Cousin It."

Billy let out a breath of laughter.

"Yeah. I guess... I just don't trust a barber not to cut off more than I want," Billy shrugged. "My Dad would love it if I came home with an army cut, lemme tell you... It'd make his fuckin' day."

"That's the first thing your Dad ever said to me," Steve said, leaning back in the booth. "He told me to go get you a haircut. Told me to get you something like mine, said my hair 'wasn't too bad..."

He made a noise of disgust in his throat. “Not too bad’...,” he scoffed. “I’m *known* for my hair. My hair is perfect. Your Dad has no taste.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t got a lot of things,” Billy snorted softly, sighing. “Him and Max were at each other’s throats before I left...”

“That doesn’t really surprise me... Max doesn’t seem like the kinda girl who's gonna just nod and agree...”

“Yeah,” Billy agreed thoughtfully, his lips twisting. He took a drink of his coffee.

“You know,” he said, after a minute, cupping his coffee mug in his palms, “I feel like I know you better than anybody I ever knew, but I also feel like I kinda don’t know you at all.”

Steve tilted his head, taking a bite of his sandwich. “Wha’ d’you mea’?” he asked, his mouth full. He was a little surprised that Billy would say something like that.

“I dunno, like… The boring shit, y’know? Like, I think by now I should be able to tell people what your favourite fuckin’ colour is, but I got no clue what your favourite colour is,” Billy said, snorting softly.

“Oh, you mean like the boring shit that people talk about when they’re first gettin’ to know each other,” Steve deduced, nodding, smiling a little. “I mean, why bother with that when a fist to the face can get the job done better?”

Billy rolled his eyes, shaking his head.

Steve laughed, taking a napkin and wiping mayo from the corner of his mouth. “Alright, alright…,” he said, raising his hands complacently. “For your information, my favourite colour is green.”

“ *Green* ?” Billy repeated, wrinkling his nose. “Really?”

“What? What’s wrong with green?” Steve demanded, laughing.

“Lots of stuff’s wrong with green,” Billy teased. “Damn, maybe we weren’t supposed to be friends, y’know?”

“Hey! Green’s nice, it’s the colour of grass, and trees… It’s all earthy and nice and the colour of life and shit,” Steve said, leaning back so the waitress who had come over could refill his coffee for him. “Thanks.”

“Plus,” he added on. “It’s my element. Y’know, my horoscope thingy or whatever.”

“Dirt’s your element?” Billy asked, grinning.

“Yeah, dirt is my element,” Steve sniffed, smirking. “As they say, *‘God made dirt, so dirt don’t hurt.* ’”

“I’ve never fuckin’ heard that, dude,” Billy said, shaking his head, taking a bite of eggs.

“Well, you wouldn’t, you friggin’ heathen,” Steve teased, chuckling, giving Billy’s foot a gentle kick under the table. “Now, tell me your favourite colour so I can make fun of you. It’s only fair.”

“Guess,” Billy said, chewing.

“Uh… Red.”

Billy made a negative buzzer noise, shaking his head. “Guess again.”

“Blue,” Steve guessed.

“Bingo,” Billy said, swallowing.

“What shade?” Steve asked him.

“What the fuck d’you mean, what shade?” Billy chortled, taking a sip of his coffee. “Are we pickin’ out colours to paint the living room or somethin’?”

“Maybe,” Steve said, raising his eyebrows. “Careful, or you’ll get your

sight back and I'll have painted everything you own the ugliest fuckin' shade of green you've ever seen."

"If I got my sight back and you did that I think I actually *would* kick your ass this time, for real," Billy said, putting down his coffee onto the table.

"Oh, you were faking last time, huh?" Steve laughed.

"Well, you're still alive, so," Billy shrugged.

"Oho, okay," Steve exclaimed, half-smiling, pretending to be offended. "Alright, mister fucking macho, what *shade of blue* is your favourite shade of blue?"

Steve watched as Billy ran his tongue over the top of his teeth, something he did when he wanted to talk but needed to find the words first.

"I dunno how to describe it," Billy shrugged.

"Just try."

"Uh, it's like… That blue the ocean gets when the sun is on it, y'know? Like, not noon, but like… In the morning or the evening? Kinda green, but still blue?"

Steve nodded, smiling, watching in delight as Billy swallowed, a pink tinge appearing on his cheeks. For some reason, he found Billy's bashfulness to be unimaginably endearing. Any time he expressed himself in a genuine way, he tended to blush. The flush on Billy's cheeks felt like a thrill every time he saw it.

"Yeah," Steve said. "You know, that's exactly what colour your eyes used to be."

"What?"

"Your eyes," Steve insisted. "That colour you like? The ocean? Your eyes used to be like that exact shade. I've been to California before,

and I know what colour you mean. When you looked at me for the first time, way the hell back then, I had this weird feeling like I'd seen you before, but I think it's just that it was that specific of a colour that it made me think of a memory or something," Steve shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe I'm just full of shit, though."

Across him, Billy seemed to be flickering through a few emotions before landing on an arrogant smirk. It didn't escape Steve's notice that he often chose that when he was embarrassed. Despite the arrogant arm Billy flung across the back of the booth, Steve didn't miss that the pink on his cheeks deepened.

"Stared at my eyes a bunch, did you, Harrington?" Billy snorted, lighting a cigarette.

Steve rolled his eyes. "Like I had a choice. You were always sticking your face into my face and staring at me like a fuckin' psycho..."

Billy let out a devilish chuckle, and Steve smiled. Though he'd gotten to know the deep and varied palette of Billy's moods, his life had been so hard lately that his arrogant teasing was often missing. For some inexplicable and masochistic reason, Steve actually missed it.

Steve left a twenty on the table for the waitress, and the two of them meandered back outside onto the sidewalk.

"You want me to cut your hair?" Steve asked him, bringing them back to the topic of his long curls. "I cut my own hair. I know what it looked like last summer, I could definitely cut it to look like that..."

Billy shrugged. "I mean... if you fuck it up, I guess I can't see it. But still— Don't fuck it up."

"I won't fuck it up," Steve snorted, assuring him.

"Okay," Billy said, his shoulder shrugging against Steve's. "Whatever. Cut my hair."

Steve grinned. "I can do it tonight, when I drop you off?"

"Yeah, okay," Billy agreed. "My Dad'll be happy..."

“No he won’t,” Steve snorted.

“No, he won’t,” Billy agreed, a small smile on his face.

Billy walked toward his house, Steve chattering in his ear, his arm hooked around his elbow. They had walked along Main Street for a while, and then gone on their usual drive. All around, a cold breeze that had been flickering around all day had whipped up into gusts of strong wind, the sky getting darker and angrier, whistling through the bare, towering oaks that lined the abandoned railways behind the house. They were just walking up toward the front step when Steve stopped dead in his tracks.

"What?” Billy asked.

“It’s... Max,” Steve said, his voice low. Billy’s heart sank to his belly.

“Max!” Steve called out.

He heard someone coming slowly down the walkway, shuffling their feet. He heard a small sniff.

“What’s wrong?” Billy demanded, extracting himself from Steve’s grip and reaching out for her. She walked up to greet him and he clutched her by the shoulders.

Max swallowed loudly.

“I... Neil...”

“Neil what?” he hissed, fury and terror rising within him like an uncontrollable flame.

“She’s hurt,” Steve said, shakily. “Her eye...”

He felt his fists clench on her jacket, his whole body beginning to tremble.

“Did Neil hurt you?” Billy whispered.

“Yes...,” Max managed, her voice thick.

Something calm stole over him. He knew what he had to do, as clearly as if God had sent him written instructions himself. He felt sure of what he had to do. Hadn't his entire life been building toward this moment? Hadn't his father been shaping his own downfall with every punch, every nasty word, every disdainful look?

"Is he still in the house?" Billy asked.

"Yes," Max sniffed.

"Get in Steve's car, Max," Billy said quietly. He let go of her, and gently pushed her by the shoulders to where Steve stood beside him.

He walked toward the door. He didn't need to be led— He knew the way. The layout of the house appeared in his mind's eye like a map. He would go inside. His father would likely be in the kitchen, fishing in the fridge. It was where he always was after he committed violence, grabbing a beer as if he deserved to relax after shattering the safety and self esteem of whoever he had hurt. Billy knew there was an axe in the closet by the door, a hatchet placed there unthinkingly, after being used to chop firewood. He would grab the axe. He would go into the kitchen.

And his father would die.

"Billy?" Steve said uneasily.

"Billy, where are you going?" Max called, her voice quavering.

He didn't respond. He kept walking.

Someone pushed him backward, their palms making contact with his chest, but wasn't strong enough to make him fall.

"Billy, stop!" Max shouted. "Don't go back in there!"

"Get in the car, Max!"

"Billy, no!"

"I have to Max. I have to. He hit you!" Billy yelled, his heart leaping in his chest, shame and guilt and love setting every nerve in his body

on fire.

“Billy, stop! Think about this for a second!” Steve shouted. He felt a hand try to tug him back, but he kept going.

“Please, stop!” Max begged, her voice breaking. He tried to step forward, but she threw herself against him.

“Please, stop, please, Billy!” she begged, pushing him and hitting him with her palms frantically. “Please don’t—“

“Go wait in the car,” he repeated calmly.

“ Nooo !,” Max cried, her blows becoming erratic, weak. She stopped hitting him, and instead wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing her face into his shirt, barely able to speak through breathless sobs.

“Please... If you go in there he’ll kill you, and even if you kill him, you’ll still get taken away forever and you can’t leave me alone... I can’t be alone... I can’t do this without you...”

Billy stopped walking.

Maybe he'd been dreaming of the day when he would get revenge on Neil, make him feel the pain and fear that he had caused Billy his entire life. Perhaps he had wanted to do it, ever since he was a child. It would have been so easy to go in there, put an axe to his father’s head, and end up locked up for the rest of his life. Maybe he had already secretly planned for this to happen. Susan was nowhere to be found. Deep down, Billy wondered if she too had left, just as his own mother had. It was selfish, he realized, to go back in there, take his father’s life, and leave Max alone in the world. What he hadn’t counted on were people like Max, like Steve, and Robin, and Nancy, and Harley... Brave little Eleven who had been so gentle and kind, who had saved him. What he hadn’t counted on was the fact that he actually gave a shit.

He put his arms around Max, hugging her fiercely, putting one of his hands on the back of her head and pressing her into his chest. Steve had held him like this, once. He hoped he was doing it right. He had felt so safe, and he knew that Max needed to feel safe. He knew

because every time his father had hit him, nobody had been there to protect him. It's what he had dreamed of, alone and crying, a thousand times over— someone to scoop him up, take him away, tell him he hadn't done anything wrong, that he would never be hit again. His time had passed, but he would be damned if he made someone else feel as lonely and helpless as he had felt.

"Okay," he whispered into her hair.

Steve's hand grabbed his shoulder, and this time he let him hold on.

"You're safe, Max," he told her. "You didn't do anything wrong. You're gonna be okay. We're gonna get away from here. I promise."

He told her all the things he had wanted to hear, the sacred words that he had been deprived of. As he spoke, holding Max close, he felt his will return to him, the notion of ending his Dad's life seeming so empty and worthless when not moments before it had felt like his sole purpose in life.

"What's going on?"

Billy's head spun, jumping in surprise.

Susan.

Max extracted herself from his arms.

"Mom," she said, her voice trembling.

He heard Susan gasp, a shocked and hollow sound.

"He... Max... What..." she stuttered.

"Oh, the whole family's outside. Guess I wasn't invited."

Billy's blood ran cold at the sound of his Dad's voice. He stepped forward and shoved Max behind him, into Steve, putting her between them.

"Oh," Neil said, his voice soft and malicious. "Steve Harrington is here too. How nice."

“Go away,” Billy said firmly.

“I’m your father, Billy, I can go wherever the fuck I please on my own goddamn property!” Neil sneered. Billy heard him coming down the front steps.

“Neil—“

“Shut up, Susan, for once in your goddamn life! If you’d have disciplined this little bitch properly, it might not have come to this!” he said, his voice quiet and furious. He was breathing hard. “Max gave me attitude for the last time today. We aren’t gonna have any more problems, are we Max?”

He felt Max’s hand clutching the back of his jacket for dear life, her body trembling like a leaf.

“F—Fuck you!” she shouted, her voice hitching in tears of rage and terror.

“Dad,” Billy ground out, fear, adrenaline, and fury coursing like a poison through his veins. “Go back inside the house.”

“Neil!” Susan gasped, her voice strangled. “You hit... You hurt... Did you hurt Max?”

“Well someone had to! And if she doesn’t learn to shut her mouth, she’ll get it again!”

"Neil!” Susan shrieked. It seemed like something had shattered inside of her. “How... You... Get out! Get out of my goddamn house!”

He heard a dreadful silence and then a clunk rang out across the yard, followed by a garbled yell of pain from Susan.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey!” Steve shouted furiously, moving away from Billy and Max toward her.

“ DON’T HURT HER !” Max shrieked, moving to run toward her mother. Billy reached out and grabbed her wrist at the last second. She tried to wrench herself from his grasp, but he held on. He knew she would only get hurt if she ran to help her.

It's what had happened to him.

"And as for you, you piece of shit little faggot," Neil snarled. "Get off my property!"

Billy yelled out incomprehensibly as another terrible blow rang out across the lawn, and the sound of Steve toppling to the ground reached his ears.

He heard Neil's footsteps moving toward him.

"Max, get behind me," he ordered, pulling on her wrist. Sobbing hysterically, she moved behind him, holding onto him like he were the mast on a ship caught in a brutal storm.

A pair of strong hands grabbed his shirt front.

"Oh? Are you defending her now?" Neil whispered venomously into his face. "I thought she wasn't your sister!"

Billy closed his eyes because he knew what was coming.

Crack .

The punch felt like it always did, a hard, stinging pain radiating across his face. He stumbled to the side, Max trying to stop him from falling. Neil got his left cheek this time. Billy noted dully to himself that this was unusual— Normally he got his right. He could hear Max shrieking, could hear a distant yell that might have been from Steve. He toppled sideways out of Max's arms onto the frozen grass, the air whooshing out of his lungs painfully as he landed. He gasped, struggling quickly to his feet. He had no idea how he was going to defend Max when he couldn't see, but he was sure as hell going to try. He would rather die than let him get away with hitting her again.

He put his fists up.

Then, many things happened at once.

Steve scrambled to his feet, his cheek stinging from where Neil had

punched him. He looked to where Susan was, slowly getting to her feet. He looked at Billy, who had jumped up, his fists out, ready to fight. Max looked terrified and defiant as Neil slowly made his way toward her.

“Hey, you fucking bastard! Leave her alone!” Billy called out to his father, stepping forward, trying to pull his attention away from Max.

Steve knew what he had to do. Taking a deep breath, he sprinted forward.

He dove for Neil, body tackling him to the ground. They went rolling away on the slope of the lawn toward the ditch, Neil bellowing like a beast, his sturdy fists punching maniacally, trying to get at Steve’s face. They finally came to a stop and Steve swerved so that he was sitting on Neil’s chest, trying to use his body weight to pin him to the ground. He wound up a punch and cracked him across the jaw. He shook out his fist, going for another, when Neil gave a great heave and flung him off, falling onto him and cracking him across the nose.

Not again … Steve thought, exasperated, as he felt the bones in his nose crunch.

He lifted his arms, defending himself.

Then, an impossibly loud bang rang out across the yard. In the bare oak trees at their backs, a flock of starlings went shrieking into the sky.

Steve and Neil looked toward the door of the house.

Coming down the porch, looking like a woman possessed, was Susan. She was holding a shotgun. On her arm swung a duffel bag, swaying with her as she stalked unsteadily forward along the damp sod in her low black heels. Her face was mottled red, her eyes wide, her pupils tiny pinpricks. Her mouth was set into a hard line, her hair wild. Her mouth was bleeding, a small bruise forming on her cheek. She came to a halt near them, holding the shotgun across her chest.

“Get up,” Susan ordered.

“Put that away before you hurt yourself,” Neil snorted with a

mocking laugh, but Steve could tell he looked a little perturbed. Behind her, Billy was clutching Max close to his chest. Max's eyes were as wide as saucers, her mouth hanging open.

Susan pumped the shotgun, reloading it, and pointed it directly at Neil's forehead.

"GET UP!" she screeched.

Neil slowly stood. Steve coughed, standing up slowly, wanting nothing more than to get away from Neil. He rubbed his chest where he had landed painfully and loped over toward Billy and Max like a wounded cat. He stood at Billy's side, behind Max.

"Susan," Neil said, rolling his eyes, licking his lips. "Don't be so goddamn dramatic—"

She jabbed him in the head with the shotgun, so quick Steve almost missed it. The blow sent Neil staggering backward, holding his head, crying out angrily. He looked up, looking like a feral, cornered beast. His eyes flicked from Susan, to Steve, to Max, and landed finally on his son. He stared at Billy, a hatred on his face so strong Steve could feel it radiating like heat.

"Get out!," Susan yelled, throwing the duffel bag and some car keys down onto the ground. "Now!"

"I'm gonna kill you, boy," Neil growled venomously, jabbing a finger at Billy. He stepped forward. "I'm gonna *kill you* , do you understand?! *KILL YOU!* " he screamed, spittle flying from his mouth, his eyes on fire.

Susan hit him with the butt of the shotgun, sending him flying to the ground. He scrambled to his feet, his shoulders hunched, his face contorted into an ugly grimace.

"GET OUT!" Susan shrieked, chasing him with the shotgun, stepping forward, kicking the duffel bag and the keys at him. " *GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT!* "

Neil gave them all one last murderous look before he grabbed the bag and keys and took off for the back of the house where his truck was

parked. Susan ran after him, disappearing behind the house. They heard one more shot ring out as the tires of Neil's truck screeched, peeling out of the driveway and grumbling up the road and out of sight.

A few moments passed and Susan re-appeared, looking flushed, teary-eyed, and absolutely exhausted. She stalked towards the front door, still holding the shotgun against her chest.

"Steve, we're having spaghetti tonight if you want to stay," she said, her voice trembling.

Then she went inside, slamming the door behind her.

"Jesus, had to practically shove a whole toilet roll in my nose," Steve said.

Billy jumped. Steve was talking funny, like he had a bad head cold, when he finally came out of the bathroom, clicking a pair of kitchen scissors together. Billy was pushing a piece of ice against his eye, a familiar bruise forming in the socket. Max sat across from him at the kitchen table, jumpy and out of sorts while Susan stirred pasta on the stove. They had been sitting together in uncomfortable silence, and Steve's arrival shattered the tension in the kitchen like a thunderclap.

"Would you mind cutting hair in the bathroom?" Susan called to him, tapping her wooden spoon on the side of the pot. "I don't want hair in our dinner..."

"No problem," Steve called back. He put on a pack-a-day New Jersey accent. "Step into my sah-lawn, *daaaahling* ."

Billy snorted and got up from the table, reaching out along the wall and walking toward the bathroom.

"Can I watch?" Max asked, her chair squeaking as she leapt up.

"Yeah, I guess," Billy shrugged. He held out his ice wrapped in a dishcloth for her to take. "Here— Stick that on your eye while you

sit."

Max took it from him. He went into the bathroom and Steve took his shoulders, guiding his ass toward the bathroom counter. "Sit up there," he instructed, standing in front of him. Billy sat.

"Okay," Steve said, his voice muffled from the tissues in his nose. "You want it like it was last summer, right?"

"Yeah," Billy shrugged.

"Cool, can do..."

Little bits of hair tickled down his face as Steve cut his hair, humming quietly to himself. He hadn't had a haircut since the incident with the Mind Flayer, and he'd been unimaginably grateful that the doctors hadn't felt the need to shave his head when they were treating him. He had never been a lucky person, but he was grateful that something about his body was still his own, still the same after the summer. His bangs had been bothering him, so Steve did them first, holding the hair down so the curl was straighter and then snipping off the end. He rubbed his fingers through his locks, ruffling his hair, adjusting the length. Billy wasn't used to anyone touching his hair, but he'd always secretly loved it when girlfriends had combed their fingers through his curls. It was relaxing. Steve had never touched his hair before, and he was amused at how gentle he was being.

"You don't gotta be so gentle," Billy snorted.

"Hey, it's not my hair, I don't wanna yank on it..."

"Aw, come on... Pull my hair and call me pretty, Steve," Billy teased, grinning.

"Ugh," Max said from somewhere near. "Do you really gotta say stuff like that?"

"Aw, sorry... I forgot you were in here," Billy chuckled.

"Oh, so it would be fine to say that to me if Max wasn't in here?" Steve chuckled, turning his head and snipping some length off of the

side of his hair. It trickled down, tickling his arm.

“Yeah,” Billy said as Steve turned his head. “‘Cause you secretly love it.”

“Oh, Billy’s a mind reader now, Max,” Steve joked. “He knows everything.”

“‘Course,” Billy shrugged. Steve grabbed his shoulder and pushed down.

“No shrugging unless you want a lopsided haircut.”

Billy let his shoulders relax. His head was spinning, in a way that wasn’t totally bad and wasn’t totally good. A lot of incomprehensible and fucked up things had happened in a very short amount of time. So many emotions were vying for his attention that he found he couldn’t feel much of anything. The sounds all around him seemed to be in hyper focus, the snipping of the scissors on his hair, the linoleum floor squeaking as Steve shifted from foot to foot, the clinking of pots and pans from the kitchen. The only thing that was silent was Max, who was somewhere in the bathroom with them but being very, very quiet. He knew the way she felt but he had nothing more to offer her that would make her feel better, nothing to say that would make the fear she was feeling any better. He knew from experience that only time could help her now.

“Okay, I gotta do the back, can you sit on the floor?”

“Yeah,” Billy said, sliding off the counter and sitting on the floor. He felt Steve at his back, and a sock foot poked him on the knee.

“Looks good,” Max said. “Steve didn’t totally screw it up.”

“That remains to be seen,” Steve muttered, still slicing away at his curls.

“Whatever. I just need it outta my face,” Billy shrugged.

“Okay… Done!” Steve announced a few minutes later, stepping back. “How’s it look, Max?”

“It looks like it used to,” she said. “Looks... Like you. Like you’re back to you.”

“Sick,” Steve said. “I’m gonna go get the broom…”

His sock feet padded away on the linoleum and Billy and Max were left in the silence of the bathroom, the fan whirring on the ceiling, water running through the pipes as Susan worked in the kitchen. Max shuffled near him and sat beside him, putting her head on his right shoulder.

“You’re gonna get hair bits all over you,” he said quietly.

She shrugged mildly. He could tell she was exhausted. He moved a tentative arm up and over her shoulders, holding her to his side. They didn’t say anything until Steve came back with the broom.

There was nothing to say.

Billy inhaled, deep and slow, the thick smoke pooling in his lungs, cold and hot at the same time. He held his breath, his chest full. He held it in as long as he could and then exhaled softly, blowing the curling smoke into the sky. He felt the shining begin in his eyes, the calm, the ticklish flicker starting in his veins. He held out the joint. Steve, sitting beside him on the peeling steps of the back porch, took it. They sat side by side, a chilly wet fog settling all around them as the day dimmed. The overhang above them dripped water onto the grass and through the gutters, trickling like crystal chimes through the eaves and down the pipes.

“That’s good shit,” Billy said after a few moments, his eyes feeling heavy, his body warm, “and I’m from California so that’s sayin’ somethin’... Where the fuck did you get it?”

Steve snorted, coughing a little as he exhaled.

“Robin’s Mom.”

“Robin’s *Mom* ?” Billy asked incredulously, grinning.

“Oh yeah,” Steve said, tapping him on the hand and giving him back the joint. “She’s got a whole little grow op in a shed on their property. It’s really good shit, dude.”

Billy took a long drag and exhaled, handing Steve back the joint.

“Damn... Wish I’d have known that, I’ve been smokin’ this dry shit from that dumbass who hangs out by the K-Mart...”

“Good old Dirty Doug...,” Steve snorted, taking a puf. “I used to buy off this guy in high school who was a couple years ahead of me who used to get it from some college guys at Indiana State, but he graduated a year before me so...”

He handed Billy the joint, sighing. “I missed that guys’ weed in my last year of high school, lemme tell you... Dirty Doug’s shit is like the seediest crap, it’s like—“

The screen door opened and someone came outside. Billy exhaled quickly and put out the joint on the step, holding it low by his shoes. Steve shifted beside him as the metal door rattled shut.

“Hey guys,” Susan greeted hesitantly.

“Is somethin’ wrong?” Steve asked.

“Oh no...,” Susan sighed. There was a pause.

“What’re you guys doin’?”

“Oh, nothin,’” Billy said nonchalantly, shrugging.

“I see,” Susan said. Then, her voice took on a lighter tone, almost teasing. “You boys wouldn’t mind sharing a little bit of that ‘nothing’ with me, would you?”

Billy blinked a few times, a small smile growing on his face. He brought the joint to his lips and lit it again.

He handed it to her.

“Oh, God— And then, and then when she did the.... The...”

Susan could hardly speak for laughing, barely able to move the wooden spoon she was using to mix brownies in a large glass bowl. She held the bowl against her side and snorted with laughter, her face bright red, tears in her eyes.

“She came out with the—The curtain rod with the— *hee hee* — The curtains on it, and she said... She said *‘I saw it in the window and I just had to have it!* ’”

Susan wheezed with laughter, putting the bowl on the kitchen table, leaning on her palms. Steve rolled in his chair, barely able to sit up. Beside him, Billy roared with laughter. They could barely keep it together for the next ten minutes as Susan painstakingly made brownies, stopping between each step to giggle for no reason.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry, it’s been so long...,” she chortled, finally managing to put the brownie mix in the pan and setting the pan in the oven. She sat down heavily in a chair to wait for the timer. Her red hair was clipped back in a messy ponytail at the base of her neck, her robe tied around her thin waist and nightgown, her feet shoved into a pair of misshapen old slippers. The clock on the wall read five to midnight. Max had wandered off to bed hours ago, tired and sick looking. Steve knew that it would take a long time for her to feel better, but the fact that Neil was gone and was gone for good meant that things were only going to get easier from here on out. In time, she would be okay.

“What are you guys doing in here?”

Steve looked up and saw Max standing in the doorway, looking sleepily into the kitchen and rubbing her eye, her brows furrowed.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry! Did I wake you up?” Susan cried, leaping up from the kitchen table and going over to her daughter.

“Yeah, I guess,” Max said, looking around the kitchen, at Steve and Billy, and the pan of brownies in the oven. Susan wrapped her arms around Max, patting her on the head. Behind her mother’s arms, Steve could see her confused expression, her bruised eye quirking

from behind the sleeve of her Mom's robe.

The timer went off and Steve leapt up to get it, so fast that he wobbled a little and had to right himself. The world was very detailed right now, time moving at an elastic and inconsistent pace. He felt like he blinked and moved like lightning, taking the brownies from the oven, and suddenly he was back in his chair, the effort of concentration almost too much for him to bear, his mind slowing back down to the consistency of molasses. Beside him, he stared in fascination at Billy's hand as it held a cigarette, the ashes falling seemingly in slow motion into the ashtray as he tapped it. He blinked. Maybe he'd hit the joint a little too hard… He heard Susan speaking.

"Do you want a brownie when they're done cooling?"

"Yeah... Okay... But Mom, it's a school night?"

"You're not going to school tomorrow... You're gonna stay home and we're gonna fix this. Your job now is to eat brownies. Okay?"

"Mom? Are you okay?"

"Of course, why wouldn't I be?"

"...Mom, are you *high* ?!"

Steve burst out laughing, and Billy laid his head on the table, cackling lowly to himself, too high to hold his head up any longer.

"Mom!" Max scolded, half perturbed and half amazed.

"Max!" Susan called back, giggling.

"Oh my God...," Max laughed, coming to sit down at the kitchen table with them. "Holy shit..."

"What? Just because I'm your Mom, I can't be cool?" Susan asked, patting Billy between the shoulder blades and taking the lit cigarette from out of his outstretched hand. He'd put his head down on the table and hadn't brought it back up again, his eyes closed, a dumb little smile on his face.

“Oh my God…,” Max muttered, shaking her head, amused and embarrassed.

Steve tried to say something about how cool it was that she’d chased Neil out of the house with a shotgun, but when he opened his mouth he couldn’t close it again and his tongue wouldn’t move fast enough to form the words. Instead he half-listened as Susan and Max talked. Billy’s face was turned to them, his cheek on the white painted surface of the kitchen table, the hand that had been holding the cigarette outstretched, his fingers sitting loosely on the wood. Steve reached out for them as if in slow motion, touching the tips of his fingers into Billy’s and holding them there. He stared at their entwined hands and thought about how nice it was that Billy’s hands were so warm. He smiled to himself.

The timer went off and Steve jumped in surprise, leaping into action. Each motion he made felt like an eternity, like each time he blinked his eyes an entire era passed and his brain had to refocus on what he had been doing. He took the brownies out and turned off the stove, bringing them slowly over to the counter. He got a knife and tried to cut them, but his hands were twinging. Had he grabbed the pan directly from the oven and not noticed? Maybe...

“Oop!” Susan called out as he jolted away from the pan. “Oh, Steve...”

Billy burst into inconsolable giggles. “Did you just grab the fuckin’ pan with your bare hands?” he croaked, water rimming in his eyes.

“Yeah,” Steve said, his tongue very thick, his world sliding. “I think I should probably go home...”

“Oh, no, Steve, I don’t think you should go anywhere...,” Susan clucked fondly, leading him to the sink and running cold water over his hands. “How about you just stay here tonight, okay?”

“Mmmm, yeah. Okay,” Steve agreed, his ability to speak and his ability to move currently existing on two different and faraway planets. He closed his eyes and let Susan run the water over his hands, feeling like he was being baptized, and then she led him back

to the table. A brownie appeared in front of him and he ate it, his throat feeling as dry and hot as oatmeal. Billy was drinking a glass of cold water and he reached for it. Billy gave it to him, and he chugged it down, the chill of the water almost too much. He looked across the table to where Max was sitting and she burst out laughing.

“Steve,” she said, “You are high as *fuck* .”

Billy was a little more aware of his surroundings. The world was still tinged in slowness and his mind was still drifting pleasantly, but he could move and speak. The shit Steve had lit had been way stronger than the crap he’d been used to smoking over the past year, and it had hit him like a ton of bricks. Steve had been no better, burning his hands and hanging out in space for a few hours lying on the sofa while Billy sat open-mouthed on his Dad’s recliner listening to the programming channel commercials. Susan had long gone to bed, and when Billy finally thought to be concerned about what time it was, Steve had also started to come around.

“Hey, dude, you awake?” Steve asked.

“Yeah,” Billy called. “What time is it?”

“It’s like three in the morning...”

“Shit,” Billy chortled. “We were fucked up, man...”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed, giggling a little. “I literally felt like I’d lived a decade every time I blinked…”

“You still high?” Billy asked, yawning.

“A tiny bit, but not really,” Steve said, sitting up. “You?”

“Naw,” Billy said, shaking his head and leaning forward, the bottom of the recliner folding back into the chair. “I wanna go to bed though, fuck…”

Billy got up, walking along the hall, and heard Steve walking behind him, following him to his room. Billy had a moment of concerned

panic flare in his gut before he took a deep breath and squashed it down. They got in bed, Steve curling into the wall on the inside into a ball, shivering a little. Billy got under the covers and closed his eyes. Steve went to sleep almost immediately, but Billy couldn't seem to relax now that he was there.

He'd never let someone sleep in his bed before. Sure, he had slept beside people plenty of times, Steve a handful of times before, but he had never had someone come into his room and stay there, crawl under his covers with him to sleep. He'd rarely brought anyone to his house to fuck, and on the rare times he had, they hadn't stayed— He'd always driven them home afterward, almost immediately, uncomfortable with them being in his space for longer than it took to get off. He was bad at pillow talk, and partners who wanted to kiss him tenderly and hold him in their arms made him nervous, because he knew what he was and where he came from, and he had known for a long time he wasn't somebody anyone should want to love. So he kept his places private, kept the cuddling to a minimum, kept the people he had crushed on, loved, and lusted over out of his bed. He thought of when he had shared a bed with Steve, at his family's cottage, and in Steve's parents' bed... It had felt strange, but somehow this was different, on a whole other level. Those beds had been common ground, neutral territory, just a place to lay down in. This felt like the time he had lay on Steve's bed after sledding back in January, feeling the linens, smelling Steve everywhere. Something intimate and personal.

He shifted. His bed was a lumpy double mattress with old sheets and a thin plaid comforter older than he was. He figured his pillowcases probably didn't match because they had never matched. He usually slept on the outside, and Steve had crawled across his legs to curl into the side by the wall, flipping open the blankets and shimmying down into them. The bed in the cottage and Steve's parents bed had been large, but his bed was a lot smaller than that, and Billy felt like no matter how he moved he kept accidentally knocking Steve's leg with his knee, or tapping him with his arm.

"Ow," Steve grumbled, his voice muffled, waking from sleep as Billy's knee knocked into his thigh.

"Well, move over then!" Billy grunted.

“I’m already against the wall,” Steve complained.

“Oh my God, you fuckin’ drama queen, Harrington… You’re nowhere near the wall.”

“You can’t see me!” Steve griped. “How the hell would you know that?”

“‘Cause there’s enough room, Harrington!” Billy said, rolling his eyes.

“If there’s enough room then stop shoving your knees into my legs,” Steve muttered.

“I’m a big guy, I can’t help it!”

“We’re the same height, dumbass!”

“Shut up, it’s my fuckin’ bed. You don’t like it? Go sleep on the fuckin’ couch,” Billy hissed furiously.

There was a pause.

“No,” Steve said flippantly, the blankets moving as he settled himself deeper into them. “No, fuck you. I’m staying right here.”

Billy was amazed, flabbergasted. What did Steve *mean* he was staying put? Billy had just kicked him out!

“I dunno if you didn’t hear me, Harrington, but I just told you to fuck off and go sleep on the couch,” he repeated, his jaw clenching. He was furious.

“And I dunno if you didn’t just hear me when I said I’m comfortable and warm and I’m not going to get up and sleep on the freezing cold fucking couch,” Steve ribbed right back crankily.

Billy’s mouth opened and closed several times, staring sightlessly into the ceiling. He was so angry he was almost confused.

“Harrington,” he said, turning his head to Steve. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Steve shifted.

“What’s wrong with *you*?” he countered. “Why’re you tryin’ to kick me out?”

Billy’s brow furrowed, his mouth set into an unpleasant and hard line.

“I just wanna sleep alone,” Billy grouched, trying to shove the real reason deep down into the depths of his heart where he didn’t have to deal with it. “It’s my own fuckin’ bed, is that too much to ask?”

Steve let out a quick and angry breath, sitting up abruptly. Cold air rushed into the blankets and pulled goosebumps to the surface of his skin.

“Fine,” Steve said shortly. “Whatever.”

He crawled quickly over Billy’s legs and stood up, the sound of his feet creaking across the floor toward his bedroom door sending incomprehensible flashes of fear stabbing through Billy’s heart. He heard the metallic creak of the doorknob opening.

“Wait, I’m sorry,” Billy begged quietly. “Please come back...”

The creaking door stopped.

“What?” Steve asked incredulously, amazed. “What did you just say?”

Billy squeezed his eyes shut feeling pathetic and stupid. What the fuck was that? What kind of pussy bullshit was that?

“Whatever. Nothing. Go to bed,” he said quickly, shaking his head on his pillow, licking his lips and swallowing hard. He felt fucking pathetic. Steve had saved him and his sister today, heroically throwing himself on Neil, putting himself willingly in harm's way... And Billy was kicking him out because he didn’t want Steve to know him, didn’t want him to gaze at the things on his walls and maybe learn something about him. He felt a jumbled mix of self loathing and fear roiling in his guts.

He was terrified his Dad would come back into the house and kill him. He'd vowed it, not hours before. He felt torn between the desperate desire to have Steve gone so he could meet what he felt was an inevitable fate, and have him stay so he could help Billy be brave in the face of what seemed like an indomitable monster. He felt disgust for letting himself accept the falling out of his Dad's violence, and disgust for thinking he had a chance to fight it. He felt sick to his stomach and wished Steve would just leave. At least then the decision would be made.

Instead, he heard Steve closing the door. Wordlessly he came over to the bed and crawled across Billy's legs, settling himself down in the blankets beside him. Many moments passed where Billy kept his eyes closed, emotions raging inside of him, his cheek twinging where his father had struck him. Neil had cracked Steve's nose, and Billy wondered how many times his nose could break before it was permanently crooked, and had the sneaking, horrible suspicion that three was the magic number. He was certain his Neil would come through the back door and kill them all. Susan had broken the broken peace of their home and Billy knew, he just *knew* , that they would be punished somehow.

And it was all his fault. If he had just left them when he had planned, they would have been happy. Steve wouldn't have a crooked nose, Max would be safe, Susan would be safe... He was the reason that there were bruises on the ones he loved, he was the cause of—

Steve shifted, and sighed loudly.

"Your mattress sucks," he muttered groggily.

Billy opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. He was overcome with waves of fear and loathing, crashing over him and receding like a relentless tide, carving away at him, dulling his sharp wit. He clamped his mouth shut and closed his eyes. He would just pretend he was asleep. He was sick, the way he always felt when his heart beat double time in his chest and his mind attacked him with cruel thoughts and his lungs stopped working. He tried to breathe, feeling a death rattle in his chest. Every creak of the mattress and sigh of the wind felt like bombs going off. Neil was going to come back, he was going to kill Max and Susan and Steve and then he

would kill him, and it was all because he didn't—

Steve rolled over, flinging an arm above his head and landing with a small thunk on Billy's forehead.

"Oops! Sorry!" Steve exclaimed. He snatched his hand away.

Billy flung his body sideways toward Steve, his throat closing on itself, trying to contain the panic pulsating through his veins.

"My Dad's gonna come back and kill us," Billy said, in a rush. "We— We gotta go, now. I dunno why I was so dumb, we should never have stayed here— He's gonna come back and he'll finish what he started, we— We gotta get going—"

Billy flung himself upright, turning, forming a panicked plan in his mind. They'd stay at a motel and then—

"Woah, woah, woah, woah!" Steve called out, sitting up beside him, putting a hand on his shoulder, gripping it tightly. "Just— Hold on!"

Billy didn't understand why Steve was hesitating. Didn't he know they were in danger? His chest tightened, his heart beating double time, his veins on fire. He was gasping, air refusing to enter his lungs. They had to go, they had to leave, they had to g *o, they had to leave, they had to go —*

"Billy!" Steve called, and he sounded very far away. "Billy!"

Billy tried to move away into the room to get their things, to grab Max and Susan, to get away from this dangerous place, but his muscles seemed to be operating at a delay. His chest ached, and he heaved, bringing a fist to his heart, throwing his legs over the side of the bed, his head bent. He felt like he was going to pass out, the blood draining from his face.

"We go—gotta— we—"

The words wouldn't form. His limbs started to lose control. Someone caught him as he slumped forward.

He was only out for a few seconds, but when he awoke again, breath

was rattling hollowly into his lungs, and he was lying back onto the bed, his feet dangling off the side. His head was propped up on something warm that might have been Steve's leg. Steve's breath from above and the tickle of his hair told Billy he was looking down at him.

"Hey!" Steve greeted, sounding distinctly concerned.

Billy tried to speak, failing several times before he managed to unstick his tongue from the roof of his dry mouth.

"I mmm need... T'Put legs up," he said thickly, his training as a lifeguard slowly filtering back to him through the fog in his brain.

"Oh, right! Shit. Duh," Steve exclaimed, leaping to action. He felt his head fall to the mattress as he moved, Steve grabbing his feet and sliding him around back onto the bed, propping them up with a pillow. He felt dazed and nauseous, the thoughts that had hammered his mind like the blows of an axe not minutes before seeming dull somehow. He knew they were in danger… He was desperate to stop it... But he couldn't move very well… He felt so pale... He would tell Steve to take Max and Susan and get out... He would just stay here...

"There," Steve said, his voice a little shrill. "Feet propped up... Uh..."

Billy felt a clammy hand slap onto his equally clammy forehead.

"Okay...," Steve said, taking his hand away.

A wave of guilt washed over Billy, so destructive it pulled tears to his eyes. Steve had just been trying to be a nice person when he had tried to befriend Billy, and now he was stuck with this person who was a shadow of who they once were, someone who was so afraid they could barely function, who saw things that weren't there and who couldn't even be strong enough to rise from bed and save his loved ones...

"I'm sorry," he whispered, his lips dry.

"I'm just glad you're breathing now," Steve said, alarmed.

God , Billy thought, his heart aching, *You should leave and never come*

back...

“I’m okay now,” Billy said, trying to sound more determined than he felt.

“Okay,” Steve said. He sounded very tired.

They were silent for a long time. Eventually, Billy felt awake enough to pull the pillow forward with his foot, bringing it up to sit between them.

“You can probably drive now,” Billy said dully. “You should go home...”

“Do... Do you *want* me to go home?” Steve asked. Billy was shocked to hear that he didn’t sound relieved... He sounded *hurt* . Their stupid fight came back to him and he licked his lips. He knew the right answer was to say Yes, to push Steve out, to make sure he was no longer embroiled in the dangerous habit of being his friend. His Dad would be out for blood, and Steve wasn’t safe with him.

But the answer he gave was not this one.

“No,” Billy said, the truth coming out of him like a nosebleed in wintertime, sudden, violent, unexpected. Steve slowly got back under the covers.

“I...,” Steve began. He paused and started again, working at covering Billy with the comforter. “You freaked me out cause... The way you were breathing, I... I used to feel like that, a lot... And I was scared ‘cause I was looking at what I used to look like when I’d feel like… Like the world was crashing in, you know? And it was... I dunno. It just... It’s different watching it happen. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah,” Billy said quietly, feeling very small.

They shared a very sad silence, lying side by side, very still.

“What if he comes back?” Billy asked quietly, his throat thick with tears.

“Then we’ll kick his ass. And we’ll win,” Steve whispered. “I

promise.”

Billy felt a hand on his cheek.

“Okay,” Billy whispered back.

12. "Skidmarks On My Heart" – The Go-Gos (1981)

April 29th, 1986

Billy handed Max a record, and found his way to her bed, sitting down on it. She took it from him.

“Kate Bush?” she asked incredulously, sitting down on the rug on her bedroom floor. “You have a Kate Bush record?”

“Yeah,” Billy said, lighting a cigarette, rolling his eyes. He flicked the zippo shut and threw it onto the bed. “Robin gave it to me. She said I should get in touch with my ‘ *feminine side* ’...”

“You have one of those?” Max asked, snorting.

“Yeah, that’s what I tried to tell her...”

“Have you ever actually, like... Listened to it?” Max asked. He heard her taking the record out of its sleeve.

He snorted. “No. Yeah, put on some Kate Bush with my Dad in the house... That woulda gone over well...”

“Yeah,” Max agreed quietly. Billy hastened to change the subject.

“So, you and Lucas still sweethearts? Still honies? Still goin’ steady? Got anything planned for your birthday?”

“Ugh,” Max exclaimed, the record sliding back into the sleeve with a snap. “Yes. And ‘dating’ is the word we use nowadays, grandpa... I’m just gonna have my friends over on the Friday night after my birthday for cake and movies.”

“Yes... Date... I’ve heard of this word... It seems like... From another lifetime, maybe...,” Billy said, smirking and lying down on the bed. He put an arm behind his head, crossing his ankles. “I think I remember this ‘date’ you speak of...”

Max giggled. “It’s actually weird that you don’t have a random girl over all the time now. I almost miss it... Almost.”

Billy smirked. “Uh... Yeah. Sorry.”

“No you’re not,” Max sniffed.

“Naw, I’m not.”

He listened as Max opened the zipper of her backpack. He heard the shuffle of papers, the click of pens, the sound of her fingers leafing through a book. This was a strange but welcome ritual they had developed in the weeks since Neil had been driven from their home. In all of their time being forced to share a home, never had he once wanted to enter or had been invited to enter Max’s bedroom. Then, three days after Neil had left for good, he’d walked by her room and stood in the doorway to ask her something, and she had invited him in. He’d come in cautiously, aware of the cruel things he’d done to her in his fits of towering rage... Broken her skateboard, bullied her, insulted her... Scared her... Being in her bedroom felt like she was willingly letting something evil into her safest space, the place where she dreamed at night, where she read her comics, where she made her plans for the future...

Now, every few days, he would appear at her doorway and she would let him in. He would lounge on her bed and smoke while she did her homework. She was way smarter than he was, so there was no fucking way he could actually help her with it, but sometimes she spoke the math equations and essay prompts out loud at him until she worked out what she needed to do.

“How’s school?” he asked her, stretching one of his legs.

“Okay,” she said. Something in the way she said it made him pause.

“What’s up?”

“Oh— It’s nothing. Just mouth breathers.”

“Mouth breathers?”

“Stupid people.”

“Stupid people,” he repeated.

“Yeah, you know... Just… Some of the girls think they’re better than everyone, and there’s this guy who’s a total dickhead, thinks he’s like the king of the school... He keeps saying super grody shit to me... It’s fine though. It’s just school.”

“Sayin’ grody things?” Billy asked, turning his head toward her. “Like what?”

“Oh, just...,” Max let out a quick breath of frustrated air. “It’s nothing. Seriously.”

“It’s somethin,’” he grumbled.

Max sighed. “It’s just... Some people think that just because their daddies have money they can do whatever they want...” She made a noise of disgust in her throat. “The sad part is, they’re totally lame! They have like no personality, and my friends back in L.A. would totally make fun of them, but... Hawkins is kinda like that... You know? They’re somehow the popular ones...”

“I didn’t know Steve was still in high school,” Billy snorted.

Max snorted and laughed. “It’s not Steve... It’s just some guy. Whenever Lucas isn’t around, he says really gross shit. Calls me like...”

She shifted on the carpet. “He calls me, like... A whore and stuff... ‘Cause we’re poor, and I hang out with mostly boys, you know? Just — Stuff like that.”

She let out a laugh that was a little too loud. “It’s totally stupid! He’s such a dumbass...”

Billy froze on the bed. It never occurred to him that while he was off looking beautiful and lording over the student body of Hawkins like a king, Max would be having the exact opposite experience. She’d always been into video games and comic books, and had always been kind of a tomboy. Her quirkiness definitely had a solid place in the big city schools of L.A., but a small town like this was a totally different story. This one had its cliques, and those cliques were strong. He supposed the only people who’d think she was cool were

Lucas, Mike, Will, Dustin, Eleven... The exact kinda kids he'd been a total asshole to all throughout his time in school. He knew Max was a tough bird— You didn't grow up alongside him and not figure out how to be tough— But something in the way she was talking set off alarm bells in his head. She didn't seem like herself. His guilt at his own deplorable behaviour and his fury at someone treating Max the way they were sloshed turbulently in his gut. He gritted his teeth, his nostrils flaring.

"Who's this kid?" he demanded, trying to siphon off some of the anger he was feeling at himself onto this faceless little shithead.

"Why are you so mad? That was the stuff *you* used to do, isn't it?" she snapped.

Billy wished he could sink into the mattress in shame, his cheeks glowing hot. Leave it to a fourteen year old to slice right through you... He wanted to be angry, but he couldn't. She was right.

"Sorry," Max mumbled after a few seconds.

"Mm," Billy said, not trusting himself to speak over the roiling emotions in his gut. He licked his lips. "I'm... I'm not like that anymore... Am I ?"

Billy genuinely wasn't sure. He didn't think he was... He really hoped he wasn't... He knew he was a dickhead, but he hoped that at the very least Max knew she could trust him now. The notion that maybe she couldn't trust him, even after everything, felt worse than any time his Dad had ever hit him.

"No," Max said hastily. "No, you're not. I'm sorry, I dunno... This guy just really pisses me off... He does kinda remind me of you, like... From before... And apparently, he reminds Mike of how Steve used to be..." She snorted. "So basically, he'll either turn out better, like you guys, or he'll always be a dick..."

"Who is he?" Billy asked again.

"I'm *so* not telling you!" she exclaimed. "You'll do something totally crazy and end up in jail or something..."

“I won’t go to jail over it,” Billy grumbled.

“Oh my God, chill! I’m not telling!”

“Why hasn’t Lucas kicked his ass yet?”

“I didn’t tell him,” Max said.

“Why not?” Billy asked, confused. Max was such a firecracker. Her not telling Lucas was almost just as mystifying as her having abstained from kicking this guy’s ass herself.

“I dunno... I just don’t want people to fight,” she mumbled.

Billy let out a small sigh. Oh. He steeled himself, his mind racing.

“Listen... I... Shit, I dunno,” Billy said, shifting uncomfortably, sitting up. “I’m not good at advice, alright? But... If I were you, I’d kick this guy’s ass, you know? Make him regret saying that shit to you. He’s a fuckin’ asshole.”

“I just... I wish I didn’t have to, you know?” she said quietly.

“Hey,” he continued. “If he’s anything like me and Steve, which it sounds like he is, he’s a fuckin’ meathead who doesn’t got two brain cells to rub together... And you know what made Steve stop being a dill weed?”

“Getting pussy whipped by Nancy?”

Billy let out a bark of laughter. “Yes— Well— *No* . Gettin’ his ass kicked by Jonathan Byers. And— Me? I used to be a total dickhead to you, right? And what made me stop?”

“Getting pussy whipped by Steve?” she quipped.

“Fuck— *Jesus Christ* — Stop it! I’m tryin’ to make a point, shit bird!”

“Sorry,” she muttered. She didn’t sound very sorry.

“ *The point is* — You kicked my ass. You stabbed me with a fucking needle and then threatened my balls with a baseball bat. *That’s*

what's gonna make him back off. Not tellin' him off, not yelling at him... Threatening his balls."

"I guess...," Max said. She still sounded a little unsure.

"What— What would Eleven do?" he asked her, grabbing for straws. She was the only girl Max had been close with in a very long time, and he could tell Max looked up to her just as much as Eleven looked up to Max.

"El?"

"Yeah. What would she do?"

Max let out a little gleeful laugh.

"Well... Actually... When Mike and Dustin and Lucas first met her, she made this guy pee his pants in front of everyone in the gym."

Billy grinned. "See?"

"Okay. Gotcha. Develop psychic powers and then make him piss his pants."

Billy lay back down on her bed, flicking his cigarette into the ashtray. "Or just kick him in the nuts, that usually works..."

Max paused for a moment before dissolving into giggles.

"Oh my God, Billy... Never become a motivational speaker... That is the worst advice I've ever heard..."

Billy rolled his eyes, smirking. "Yeah, yeah, well... Whatever. I tried."

Encouraging cowboy speeches were not his strong suit whatsoever. He wasn't even sure if telling her to kick this guy's ass was a good idea, but... It's the only advice he had to give. He thought about what Steve would have told her to do, and he was almost certain the answer would have *also* been to beat the shit outta this little creep... And the thought made him feel a little better about it.

"What's your homework on?" he prompted after a few minutes of

listening to her arranging her school things.

“Shakespeare” she groaned. “I mean, I like it and stuff, it’s just a lot of work. We have to write an essay for next week on it.”

“Mmm,” Billy agreed. He’d never been good at English class. Reading was really hard for him and always had been. He had skidded by in his English class with a 51% in his final year.

“I bet your friends love it,” Billy snorted. They seemed the type, especially that Dustin kid.

“Not really,” she sighed. “They’re big science geeks. I like science a lot too but I also like English.”

“What’s your essay on?” Billy asked. He had a feeling she was trying to avoid doing it by talking.

“Oh,” she said, sighing. He smirked. “It’s on *Macbeth* . You know, the one with the witches and the guy who kills the king...” Max affected a dramatic, crazed voice and a bad British accent. “ *Out, damned spot!* ” she cried.

"Yeah,” Billy yawned. He knew it. Just because he couldn’t read very well didn’t mean he couldn’t understand what was being said when the other kids were reciting parts of it in class.

“The teacher said we can write about anything we want, but I dunno...”

“Who d’you like the best? What character, I mean?” he asked her, putting the ashtray on his chest and tapping his cigarette into it.

“Um,” she said thoughtfully. “I kinda like lady Macbeth. She’s the one who makes Macbeth do everything, and then she goes crazy and thinks she has blood on her hands when she doesn’t.”

Billy blinked, his mouth parting. His heart felt frozen in his chest. “Yeah,” he said quietly.

Max paused. “You know, ‘cause... She made things happen but she didn’t actually do anything herself...”

“Do you think she’s guilty?” Billy asked her.

“Of course she is... She convinced Macbeth to murder people...”

“Do you think Macbeth is guilty?”

“I guess...,” Max said unhappily.

“It’s not supposed to be a happy story,” he reminded her.

“I know...”

A quiet fell between them.

“Why’s it a sad story?” he asked her.

“Well— ‘Cause it ends sad. It ends... With everyone unhappy, or dead. Everything ends. It’s a tragedy.”

“Why’s it a tragedy?”

“Because...,” Max paused. “Well... Because it could have been avoided... The witches made a prophecy, but they didn’t understand it. They just acted because they thought it was fate, but they were wrong. And it’s sad because they... They sort of made their own downfall.”

Max began scratching furiously on a piece of loose leaf. Clearly, she had found her thread. Steve’s voice echoed in his mind from months in the past, yelling at him that he wanted to be his friend.

“Life doesn’t turn out the way we plan...,” Billy murmured.

“What?” Max hummed, her pen stopping for a moment on its journey across the page.

“Oh— Nothing...,” Billy said, waving his hand.

May 9th, 1986

" *Hey man,* " Steve's voice sighed on the other end of the phone. *"Sorry— Someone called in sick and I gotta cover. I know we were all gonna hang before the movie, but..."*

"Oh, dude. It's fine," Billy shrugged.

"Yeah— Robin and Nance already came by here, they're gonna come and get you and hang out. They said they have nothing better to do... Nance has her Mom's station wagon..."

"Oooh, pussy wagon," Billy smirked.

"You know what? Knowing what I know about you and Nancy's mom, that isn't even funny..."

Billy grinned.

"Anyways— They said they'd be by soon, so... Just a heads up."

"Alright. Get back to work before the boss grills your ass..."

"Yeah... Okay, see you later."

Billy hung up the phone, getting his coat. He had barely flung his hair over the collar when someone knocked on the front door. He made his way out into the hall and opened it.

"Hey Billy!" Robin chirped.

"Hey," he greeted. He paused for a moment, unused to the fact that he could let the girls into his house without worrying about his Dad.

"Come in," he said, stepping aside.

"I've never been in your house before," Robin observed. "But I guess there's a good reason for that."

"Yeah," Billy snorted derisively, going to the back door.

"Oh— Is this your room? The lair of the beast?" Robin demanded, a door creaking open. Billy's head snapped up and he abandoned his boots by the door, quickly moving down the hall and stepping past

Robin into his room.

“This is it,” he said stiffly, standing awkwardly in the middle of the room. “Uh... Sorry about the babe posters...”

He guessed they might think it was gross or something... He had no idea. Chicks usually occupied his room in the dark.

“Well, *I* personally don’t mind,” Robin said.

Billy rolled his eyes.

“The weather is totally shit, can we just hang out here?” Nancy asked, sighing wistfully. He jumped as she brushed by him. He heard her settle herself on his bed.

“Yeah, come on! We’ll just hang out, put an album on... You know, just hang!” Robin enthused.

“Uh... Okay?”

Max walked in the house through the back door and immediately noticed loud music blasting from Billy’s room. This wasn’t unusual, only this time instead of Metallica, she heard Cyndi Lauper lamenting *Time After Time* through the hall and into the kitchen. She walked slowly toward his bedroom door, which was open a crack, and stood in front of it, hesitating. There was no way it had been his idea to play Cyndi Lauper, so the odds were high that he was in there with a girl. She had accidentally walked in on him before when he’d had a girlfriend over, and the horrific sight of his bare ass was burnt forever into her memory. She did *not* want a refresher.

Plastering a hand over her eyes, she opened the door.

“Billy?” she called, wincing.

Two feminine voices cackled in laughter as the door creaked open.

“Oh my God, her hands are over her eyes!” Robin wheezed.

“Billy! You don’t lock the door when you’re with a girl?” Nancy

scolded, laughing. “Poor Max!”

Max slowly let her fingers fall, and sighed in relief when she saw it was only Nancy and Robin. Billy was leaning against the side of his bed, sitting on the floor, Nancy lying on her belly on top of the bed and combing his hair. Robin was sitting cross legged beside him on the floor, holding a nail buffer. She got up and turned down the radio.

“Oh my God,” she snorted, tears in her eyes. She beckoned for Max to come in. Max let her backpack slide off of her shoulder near the door and came to sit near Robin.

“You must have traumatized her, Billy,” Robin giggled, sitting back down and starting to buff Billy’s nails again. Beside her were a couple of bottles of nail polish that Max recognized as some she’d left in the bathroom.

“He did,” Max said flatly. “I couldn’t sleep for a week... Every time I closed my eyes, I saw an ass whiter than the moon...”

Nancy and Robin howled with laughter, rolling on the rug and on the bed. Max grinned, leaning forward and patting Billy on the knee.

“Well— That’s why you knock, shit bird,” he snorted, a lit cigarette hanging from his lips. He tried to look very annoyed and macho about the whole thing, but it was hard for her to take him seriously sitting as he was. Max crossed her legs and watched, half in amazement and half in delight, as Nancy and Robin slowly worked at Billy’s nails and hair until he had pretty much melted, his head leaning lazily against the side of the bed, his spine curved, his legs sprawled out on the rug. He seemed genuinely relaxed, much to Max’s amusement.

“Sorry— I kinda raided your nail polish... You want me to do your nails?” Robin asked her, putting Billy’s hand on the floor. “He won’t let me paint his...”

“Okay!” Max smiled. She hadn’t spent a lot of time with Robin, but she thought she was super cool. Robin reminded her a lot of Harley, who was definitely the coolest person she has ever met. Way cooler

than Steve was, that's for sure...

"Hey, where's your incurable wart, Billy?" Max asked as Robin took her hand and started to paint her nails black.

"He had to work late," said Billy. "He's comin' later though..."

Robin smirked mysteriously at Max's fingernails, like she was holding in a very funny joke. Max looked over at Billy and saw something weird and subtle happening on his face that she didn't really get.

Maybe it was an inside joke.

"You got a boyfriend, right?" Robin asked her, taking her pinkie finger.

"Yeah, Lucas. You met him last summer when... Well, when the shit hit the fan."

"Oh yeah! How's he?"

"Good," Max shrugged. "Can't seem to get rid of Dustin and Mike though. He keeps inviting them to stuff when I thought it was just gonna be us on a date, and it's like... Ugh! Just leave them home for like five minutes..."

"I could make Mike stay home for you sometime," Nancy offered, laughing, "but you'll have to get Steve to offer to babysit Dustin."

"I'm sure Dustin would love that... Steve gave him some advice about girls that one time and now he won't shut up about his girlfriend and trying to give us all tips on kissing," Max said, making a disgusted noise in her throat. "Like... Ew, no thanks... I think I figured it out..."

"Is that advice any good, Nancy? Is Steve a good kisser?" Robin asked, turning and grinning at her.

"Mmm," Nancy hummed, smiling a little. "Yeah. He is. I have to say."

"Nancy, you probably never kissed anybody before Steve, how the fuck would you know?" Billy demanded, smirking.

Nancy's mouth opened in mock-offence and she smacked him on the shoulder. "Rude!" she exclaimed.

"Who's the better kisser, Steve or Jonathan?" Robin asked, blowing on Max's nails.

"Well— Steve has more practice, but Jonathan has more passion."

"What the fuck kinda answer is that?" Billy demanded, crossing his arms, his cigarette bouncing on his lips as he spoke.

"It isn't one, she just doesn't wanna rank them cause she doesn't wanna hurt either of them," Max informed him knowledgeably.

"Ah."

"It's Steve," Robin said, grinning devilishly, finishing up Max's fingernails. "It's totally Steve. She just loves Jonathan still so she doesn't wanna admit Steve's better."

Nancy squeezed her eyes shut, grinning in embarrassment. "Shut up!" she shrieked, laughing.

"So maybe there *is* a method to Steve's madness, then, hey Max?" Billy grinned. "Might be a good idea to listen to Dustin if that's where he's gettin' his tips..."

"Ugh, don't make me hurl...," Max shuddered. "Steve might be a good kisser but I am so not taking any advice he gave *Dustin* , of all people..."

"Hey— Dustin is a sweetie," Nancy clucked affectionately, absentmindedly braiding Billy's hair.

"Sure— But I could do without the sexy growling..."

"Mmm," Nancy hummed, laughing lightly. "Alright. That is a bit much. Is Lucas a good kisser?"

"Um... yeah, I guess," Max shrugged, blushing.

"He's your first kiss, huh?" Robin said, nudging her affectionately on

the cheek with her knuckles.

“No, but— He’s like my first real boyfriend. Boyfriends when you’re ten totally don’t count...”

“Yeah, all the boyfriends I had when I was ten don’t count,” Billy deadpanned. Nancy chuckled, but Robin spun around and gave him a strange look.

“Whatever— He’s a pretty good kisser, I think,” Max said, shrugging.

“I wonder if your brother is a good kisser,” Robin said, smiling. “What d’you think?”

“Um,” Max said, “First of all— *Gross.* Second of all – He *better* be good at kissing since he’s had so many fucking girlfriends.”

Robin flung her head back and cackled.

“Oh my God, you’re so funny...” she wheezed. “Seriously, Billy— I’m about to replace you with her…”

“Ugh,” Billy groaned, not making an effort to move or stop being pampered by Nancy in the slightest. “When’s Steve gonna get here? This chick stuff’s just gettin’ too much...”

“Chick stuff?” Robin guffawed.

“Oh, shut up, you love it,” Nancy scolded.

“Whatever. When‘s Steve off work again?”

“Oh my God! Seriously?” Robin exclaimed. “Steve, Steve, Steve! Aren’t we good enough for you?”

“No,” Nancy said, sighing, grinning. “How could we be? Compared to Steve?”

“I bet Billy just lies around all day and waits for him to call,” Robin cackled, standing up.

“He does, I’ve seen him,” Max interjected.

Billy rolled his eyes. Robin flung herself dramatically across Billy's bed, grabbing his phone from the side table and clutching it to her chest. She put the back of her hand across her forehead and stared dewy eyed into the ceiling.

"Oh, Steve... Wherefore art thou, Steve? When wilst thou call me?" she called dramatically into the air.

"Exactly," Nancy giggled. "And at night he's like..."

She leapt up, sitting beside Robin, holding her school binder to her chest, looking wistfully across the room.

"Dear Diary," she said, affecting a silly deep voice and pretending to write. "Today Steve didn't call me... My life is nothing but sadness... Those dumb bitches Nancy and Robin called, but who gives a fuck about them? They're not *STEVE!* "

She threw her binder across the room, scattering loose leaf across Billy and Max on the floor. Nancy and Robin shrieked with laughter, clutching each other, breathless. Billy's head was turned halfway toward his bed, his expression gobsmacked. Clearly he had never been teased like this in his entire life. He nudged Max, who was giggling beside him.

"Is this what girl sleepovers are like?" he asked her, amazed.

"It means they like you," Max explained, grinning, patting him on the top of his half-braided head.

"Well hello, old friend."

Steve turned around, holding a bag of Doritos that he was stocking on the snack shelf. He caught sight of Dustin and grinned, abandoning the bag of chips and standing up.

"Hey, man!"

Dustin laughed and came over. They did their elaborate secret

handshake, and Steve whirled away, pretending his guts were spewing onto the peel-and-stick tile floor. He crossed his arms over his green uniform vest.

“How’ve you been? How’s high school treatin’ ya?” he asked, leaning a hand forward and ruffling Dustin’s hair affectionately. Dustin rolled his eyes, ducking out of his grasp.

“School is school, and I’ve been good.”

“How’s Suzy?”

“She’s great!” Dustin enthused happily. “We talk every night for hours... Last night we talked until two in the morning!”

“Woah, careful! Don’t burn the candle at both ends!” Steve chuckled.

“How have *you* been?” Dustin asked, raising his eyebrows and giving Steve a significant look.

“Just here,” Steve sighed, throwing his arms wide. “My kingdom...”

“Max told us about what happened.”

Steve blinked and looked at Dustin, really looked at him. He was getting tall, stretching out, his voice deeper than it had been last year. He was growing up.

“Yeah,” Steve sighed. He turned back to the chip display, stocking the box of Doritos, giving his hands something to do.

“My Dad was like that.”

Steve froze. He turned to Dustin. “Wh.. What?”

“My Dad was like Max’s step Dad,” Dustin repeated calmly. “I don’t really remember him. My Mom kicked him out when I was little.”

“Oh, shit, man...,” Steve murmured, standing up and putting a hand on Dustin’s shoulder. “I didn’t know.”

Dustin shrugged, unbothered. “He’s gone forever now, so it doesn’t

matter. Me and Mom are fine. But— That's not why I brought it up. I guess I'm just thinking... Billy..."

"He's okay," Steve said, wondering where Dustin was going with this. "He's just kinda jumpy, you know? He thinks Neil's gonna come back..."

"He won't," Dustin said confidently. "Max's Mom scared the shit out of him. Guys like him are cowards. And Billy's got you now, right? Max said he isn't as much of a dickhead anymore since you started hanging with him."

"I guess," Steve shrugged, smiling a little down at his hands. Billy was still a crude asshole, sure, but he weirdly liked that about him. What Billy *wasn't* anymore was unstable, violent, and mean. He wouldn't put that down to just his involvement, not in a million years, but... It was nice to know Max had noticed. "I was actually supposed to hang with him, Nancy, and Robin this evening but my boss made me stay..."

"Brutal. But, they'll still be there when you're done," he said calmly, shrugging.

"Yeah...," Steve agreed. He sometimes wondered who was the older brother and who was the younger brother in their odd dynamic.

"So— Go on any dates?" Dustin asked, grinning. He grabbed a bag of Doritos from the shelf and popped it open.

"Hey!" Steve protested.

"Don't worry, I'll pay— Just answer the question."

"No, I've not been on any dates... I'm stuck here, aren't I?" Steve said, grabbing another bag and putting it on the shelf to replace the one Dustin had taken.

"What! You should be able to get tons of dates working here! Everyone rents movies!" Dustin said, crunching on a Dorito and gesturing emphatically with fingers covered in cheese dust.

"There isn't exactly a huge population of girls my age left here, you

know," Steve said, rolling his eyes. "All the girls still here are taken or not my type, and the rest of the girls are in college."

"Oh, come on! That's not true," Dustin said encouragingly, sliding down to sit on the floor next to him.

"Uh, yeah! It's kinda true!" Steve sighed back, throwing the empty cardboard box away and pulling forward an opened box of Cheetos. He took a bag out moodily and put it on the shelf.

"Uh, no it's not!" Dustin sassed back sarcastically. "You're just not trying."

Steve paused, rolling his eyes to the ceiling and shaking his head. But Dustin was right... He *hadn't* been trying. He hadn't even realized he hadn't been trying until Dustin had pointed it out to him. He looked down at Chester Cheeto grinning at him from the box and wondered why that was.

"Alright," he said. "Maybe I'm not trying. You're right..."

"Well, why not?" Dustin asked, swallowing a chip. "You're still a good looking young guy with lots to offer."

Steve grabbed a couple bags of Cheetos and arranged them thoughtfully. He leaned back on his haunches and shrugged.

"I dunno," he said. "I guess I just don't see anybody I like, and if I see someone I think is cute, I'm just not interested or I don't think about it."

"Maybe you have a crush on someone already," Dustin said, shrugging.

Steve furrowed his brow. Dustin didn't know about Robin being gay. "Uh, not likely."

"I mean— It's the only logical explanation," Dustin continued, undeterred. "You either don't see anybody you like, meaning you already like someone, and when you do see someone you're not interested because you're already thinking of someone else. Ergo, crush."

Steve blinked. “I only hang around with like two girls, Dustin. I don’t think that’s the case.”

Dustin shrugged. “I mean, I’d go for Robin if I were you—“

“Not this again...”

“But I’m not you, so... I guess you’ll just have to realize it on your own.”

“Robin’s seeing someone already,” Steve said, shaking his head.

“Oh, bummer,” Dustin sighed, licking the cheese dust of his fingers. “It’s your fault, though. You waited too long.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Waited too long. That’s why me and Robin aren’t dating...,” Steve agreed sarcastically. If only Dustin knew. “Have you ever considered that maybe I’m not *Robin’s* type?”

“True,” Dustin conceded. “What’s her boyfriend like?”

“Uh, super cool,” Steve said, trying not to give away too many details. He knew Dustin would be good about it if he found out but it wasn’t his confession to make. He’d already accidentally outed her once, he wouldn’t do it again.

“Well, you just gotta be cool too!” Dustin shrugged.

“I am cool!” Steve protested.

“You aren’t, but that doesn’t mean you don’t deserve love and happiness.”

“Wow, you’re so generous. High school really made you a know it all, huh...”

“I was already a know it all,” Dustin laughed, rubbing his nose. He paused for a moment, his face faltering.

“Um... I know you’re probably super happy to hang with people your age and stuff, and I know you’ve been super busy—Hell, I’ve been super busy— But, um...”

Steve put a bag of Cheetos on the shelf and reached out, giving Dustin an encouraging rub on the shoulder.

“But I been kinda ignoring you,” Steve finished for him.

“Yeah. I mean— We’re not the same age or related or, or whatever but... I don’t know. I just don’t have a lot of guys in my life other than my friends, and it sorta makes me feel like a weirdo. Y’know?”

“Hey, is someone being a dick to you?” Steve asked, concerned.

Dustin shrugged, his raincoat dripping onto the floor. “It’s nothing new, it’s just... I dunno.”

“Hey, listen man... You’re a good kid. A nice kid. You’ve got good friends, you do good in school, and you got a girl who loves you. Right? You don’t need anything else. You’re only like fourteen, man. Don’t worry about it.”

Dustin shrugged. Steve knew he’d been bullied most of his life for looking different, having problems with his teeth, having problems with his speech... He was even ashamed to admit that Dustin was the exact kind of kid he used to make fun of when he was in school. Looking back, he didn’t even know why he’d done it. It wasn’t like he’d gained anything by being a dick.

“I know,” Dustin mumbled. Steve felt bad. Normally Dustin was unfazed about the bullying, or at least, didn't dwell on it. Someone must have said something that really got to him.

“If it’s about your Dad not being around... Well. I know from personal experience that the kids who treat you like that probably wish their Moms had kicked out their Dads a long time ago, like yours did.”

Dustin looked at him, blinking. “Like Billy?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, chuckling sadly. “Like Billy.”

A quiet lapsed between them.

“Well– Sorry, I gotta dip,” Dustin continued casually, crunching up the empty chip back in his hand. “Mom wants me back soon.”

“Okay, man,” Steve smiled, gently punching Dustin on the shoulder. “Listen– I am busy all the time, but… If you wanna talk, just call me or come in and visit. Okay?”

“Alright,” Dustin agreed. He walked away, shoving the empty plastic bag into the trash can by the front door. He waved, smiling, and walked out.

Steve looked back at his chip display and shook his head, sighing. He paused.

“Wait!” he yelled, annoyed, standing up. “Dustin! You didn’t pay me for the chips!”

May 16th, 1986

Billy dipped his head out of the window of the Camaro and stuck his tongue out, his hair flying in the warm spring breeze. He cackled loudly out into the world, his fingers gripping the edge of the door. He had no idea where they were and he didn’t care. The icy wind had finally calmed, the leaves unfurling— He had never experienced a spring like this one, so mild and so sweet, the smell of the green leaves like a heady wine to his senses. Flowers exploded across the blooming world like firecrackers, ditches, fallow fields, and forests coming to life slowly and then all at once. He could smell each blossom, could feel every warm ray of sun that hit his starved skin... He smiled so wide his cheeks hurt, the radio crackling in and out as the car swerved expertly around the curves of the roads, led by Steve’s steady hand. Billy could hear Steve chuckling at him, so he turned his head inwards, his hair blowing in his face.

“What?” he demanded, grinning from ear to ear.

“Nothing,” Steve chuckled back, over the wind.

“It’s somethin,’” Billy prodded, wiping his hair out of his face.

“I dunno,” Steve said, snorting. “You’re just... I have never seen you like this... Ever.”

“I haven’t seen you at all in a year, what’s it to ya?” Billy bellowed, squeezing his eyes shut, howling in laughter at his off colour joke.

“Okay— You definitely smoked a blunt before I picked you up,” laughed Steve.

“So what if I did?” Billy said, flinging his head against the headrest, the late spring breeze blowing lovely and sweet through the window onto his face. He flared his nostrils, taking it in.

“Oh, nothin’— Just that you didn’t wait for me!”

“I got more, y’know,” Billy told him, lifting his hand out of the open window and waving his fingers along the breeze. “God— What is that *smell?* ”

“Good smell or bad smell?”

“Good.”

“We’re driving out past a couple fields... I dunno, maybe some flowers in them are smelling good, I don’t really smell it though...” Steve nudged Billy teasingly. “More likely it’s your brain melting, ya fuckin’ wastoid...”

“You’re one to talk,” Billy said, smiling, swishing his fingers through the air.

“Yeah, yeah...”

A short silence lapsed between them.

“You wanna stop?” Steve asked him.

“Stop?”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “Y’know... In the field.”

Billy turned his head to the side, smirking. “You just wanna smoke up,” he accused.

“Yeah, and?” Steve demanded, laughing.

“ *And* we’re supposed to get Max in a couple hours,” Billy said, trying to sound responsible. “And I don’t want some dumbass who’s high as a kite driving her.”

“Alright, fine... But you’re smokin’ me up after.”

“Mhmm,” Billy hummed. He closed his eyes. Sure, he was still a little high... But the world seemed so lovely and alive... And he was with Steve. Something heavy knocked on the door to his heart and he opened it, reveling in his beautiful secret in the safety of his car and Steve’s company. His Dad’s face swam into his mind’s eye like a mirage and he wondered, not for the first time, what he would think of all this. He knew what the answer was, and somehow it made his recklessness all the more sweeter.The Camaro slowed and then turned, gravel and dirt crunching.

“Where ya goin’?” Billy asked.

“Stopping in the field,” Steve said, sounding strangely delighted with himself.

“Wh— I just told you that I’m not gonna let you drive Max around if you’re wasted!”

“I’m not gonna get wasted, chill! I just have my camera today and, like... I dunno, the field looks really nice.”

Billy blinked. The car slowed to a stop and Steve parked it, getting out and shutting the door. He appeared a few moments later at Billy’s side, leaning in the open window.

“You coming or not?”

Billy got out, his worn sneakers shuffling in the dirt road and took a deep breath. It really did smell amazing. Steve took his hand and led him across the tall, overgrown grass. All around them crickets sang and clicked into flight, the tall grass swishing along their legs. Steve stopped, taking his hand back, and Billy listened as he took a couple of pictures.

“I got this camera for Christmas from my parents, but I haven’t been

using it as much as I should," Steve explained. "I dunno, I guess I kept waiting for the right moment to take pictures, but there really isn't ever a perfect moment, is there?"

"Guess so," Billy shrugged. Photographs had always been a bit of a novelty in his life. They'd never really had a camera hanging around. He had very few pictures of himself as a child.

"Here," Steve instructed, holding his upper arm and gently pushing him backwards.

"What're you doin'?"

"Takin' your picture."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

Billy couldn't really argue with that logic. He stilled his face and let Steve take his picture.

"Sit down," Steve instructed.

"Jesus Christ, what am I? A model?"

"Yeah," Steve chuckled. "Sit down."

"I charge by the hour, just so you know," Billy snorted, leaning down and settling into the tall grass. It tickled his back and swayed against his fingertips. He jumped when Steve's fingers brushed his ear, and something delicate and fragrant touched the skin of his temple.

"Did you just put a flower in my hair, Harrington?"

"Yeah, you look great."

"Doubtful..."

"Stop looking like you're at a funeral!"

"I—Fuck you, I always look like this!"

“Yeah, and you always look like you’re at a fucking funeral, now smile!”

Billy bared his teeth like a pissed off monkey and Steve reached out and swatted him. Billy recoiled, grinning, trying to swat him back. As he reached for Steve, he heard the click of the camera, and Steve quickly cranking the advance for another one.

“Stop it, you dumbass,” Billy laughed, reaching forward and trying to yank the camera away.

“No,” Steve snorted, pulling away, moving to sit beside Billy instead.

“Okay. I’m gonna try and take a picture of both of us...”

“You’re gonna develop those and it’s gonna be like half my face and your thumb,” Billy smirked.

“Shut up. Smile, you fuckin’ dummy,” Steve said. Billy turned his head to Steve instead. He clicked the camera. Steve stood, hauling Billy to his feet.

“Alright, we should get goin’...”

They walked back to the car and got inside. Steve backed out of the dirt road and onto the pavement, shifting gears. As they picked up speed, Billy felt the flower sitting above his ear swaying against his face. He plucked it from his hair, holding it in between his fingers, and reached out the window, letting the wind take it. His high was fading, but for once his sense of peace was not. His hand was moving before he could stop himself, reaching out and gently feeling out for Steve. When he found his lap, he crawled his hand upward, finding his shoulder.

“What, what’s up?” Steve asked him, concerned in an instant.

Billy opened his mouth to talk but the words took a while to find their way out of his throat.

“You know I like you, right?” he said. His heart skipped a beat and he hastily corrected himself. “Like... I like bein’ your friend?”

“Jesus, I’d hope so, we’ve only been hangin’ out for like most of a year,” Steve laughed.

“Whatever,” Billy grumbled, rolling his eyes, the corners of his mouth quirking despite himself. “You know what I mean.” He took back his hand.

Steve let out a little quiet laugh.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice twinkling in laughter, “I know what you mean.”

Billy closed his eyes.

God , he thought to himself, *God, I hope you do.*

“Jesus, what’s taking Max so long?” Steve grumbled, shifting from foot to foot. “I gotta piss so bad...”

“Why didn’t you go beforehand?” Billy asked him, rolling his eyes.

“Cause— Jesus, I dunno! Whatever,” Steve grumbled.

“Go in the woods or something,” Billy shrugged, lighting a cigarette.

“Yeah, expose myself on school property, that’ll go over well...”

“Hey, you’re so young looking, they’ll just think you’re one of theirs,” Billy grinned, swatting him playfully on the arm.

“Oh, whatever... I’m gonna run around back into the woods, try and keep far away...”

“Yeah, yeah...” Billy nodded.

Steve sprinted away through the grass.

Billy smoked, his eyebrows furrowed. Max was taking a long time... She usually didn’t take this long. The last time she’d taken this long, something had been horribly wrong... The little creature from the upside down had been let loose. He hoped it was nothing like that...

The way she had talked about school the other day in her bedroom also gnawed at him uncomfortably.

He lifted his head as he heard multiple pairs of sneakers pounding loudly toward him across the pavement.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!”

He knew that voice— It was that Dustin kid. The herd of footsteps ran near him, and he gestured with his cigarette.

“Hey, what the fuck—“

“Hide us!” Dustin squealed. Billy heard the sound of him and a few other bodies sliding along the rocky pavement, filing in behind the Camaro and out of sight from the school.

Billy turned around.

“What the fuck is going on?” he demanded, annoyed.

“I punched that mouth breather yesterday!” Max hissed.

“Well— Good for you. Now stop hiding.”

“You don’t get it!” Mike exclaimed. “His older brother is home from college and he totally sicked him on us... He’s like six feet tall and plays college basketball!”

“Who the fuck does that?! We’re like five years younger than him!” Lucas demanded angrily. “What a fucking coward!”

“Shh, he’s coming!” Dustin hissed.

The nervous buzzing of Max and her friends died out instantly behind him. He turned around, taking a deep drag of his cigarette, narrowing his eyes. The more details he heard about this professed mouth breather, the more he had a sneaking suspicion he knew who it was — Or at least, who he was related to.

He heard someone running across the parking lot and stop near him.

“Oh—Shit! Haven’t seen you in a while,” greeted Tommy Hagan, breathless.

“Hey,” Billy grunted, flicking his cigarette. It turned out his suspicions were correct.

“Have you seen a group of little assholes run this way?” Tommy asked him.

“I dunno. What’d they look like?”

“Weird looking kid with braces, some nerd... Black kid and his little redhead girlfriend?”

“Hm, might’ve. How come?”

“The little redhead cunt punched my brother in the face yesterday.”

Billy flicked his cigarette onto the ground, nodding, straightening up.

“Sounds like your brother needs to grow a pair and stop bein’ a little bitch,” Billy said, hooking his thumbs into the waistband of his jeans.

“What?”

“I said,” Billy said, stepping forward, his voice a low whisper. “It sounds like little baby Hagan needs to grow a pair and stop being a little fucking bitch.”

“What the fuck is it to you, Hargrove?” Tommy sneered.

“That little red headed bitch... Is *my* little sister.”

“Wha—“

Billy leaned his head in, interrupting him.

“Now, I’ve heard some things about this guy, your kid brother... Not only did I hear he was a whiny little bitch, I also heard that his stupid ass likes calling my sister a whore... The way I heard it, your little brother is a fucking *shitstain* , Tommy Hagan... Just like you, huh?”

“Fuck you, Hargrove!” Tommy growled, shoving him angrily. “You always did think you were better than everyone else, huh? But guess what? You’re just like Harrington! A sad sack of shit who’ll never—“

Pushing him had been the wrong decision, because now he knew where Tommy was. Billy cranked back his fist and decked Tommy right across the face, who tumbled heavily to the pavement like a fallen tree. Billy kicked his leg out to find him, then stood over him, crouching down.

“Listen,” Billy hissed into his face. “If your brother ever fucks with my sister again, he’s fucking dead. You hear me?”

Tommy sniffed, his nose bleeding.

“Fuck you!” he gargled.

“No,” Billy whispered, “Not in a million years.”

He slammed Tommy down onto the pavement, just like he had done to Steve in the Hawkins High gym so long ago, and stood up straight, stepping back.

“Hey, Tommy,” Steve’s voice greeted flatly from beside him. He must have returned from his trip to the woods while he’d been fighting.

“Fuck you, Harrington!” Tommy yelled, scrabbling to his feet. “This isn’t over!”

“Tommy, fuck off. Seriously, you’re an embarrassment... I thought college was supposed to make you smarter,” Steve snorted derisively.

“Tch. Hagan’s as smart as he can get, it’s all downhill from here,” Billy said, clicking his tongue.

“Tell your nasty brother to eat shit and die!” Max yelled, coming out of her hiding place from behind the Camaro.

Tommy backed away and then ran, headed for his car across the other side of the parking lot. He got in and the engine roared to life.

“Charming,” Steve muttered as the car screeched out of the parking

lot. He nudged Billy. “What the hell was that all about?”

“Max punched his brother,” Billy shrugged, leaning against his car and pulling out his pack of smokes from the front pocket of his shirt.

“Oh— Good one,” Steve congratulated Max mildly.

“Thanks,” Max said “And where were *you* ?”

“Oh— Had to pee.”

“Nice. Leaving my blind brother all alone...,” Max said in a baby voice, patting Billy on his arm. “How could you?”

“Chyeah! Helpless. *Sure* . I’m pretty sure Tommy H. just pissed his pants.”

Billy rolled his eyes, turning his head behind him.

“Hey, geeks! The danger is over, you can come out now...” he called to them, a cigarette bouncing on his lips. They slowly emerged from behind the car. Billy overheard Lucas asking Max quietly if she was okay, and turned away.

“So, uh... You kids need a ride?” Steve asked.

Billy leaned against the wall, his arms crossed, and listened as Max’s friends scream-sang happy birthday to her. He closed his eyes, their voices echoing around the kitchen.

“Make a wish!” Lucas called.

He heard Max blow out her birthday candles, and her friends clapped. Nearby, Steve chuckled.

“If there’s icing on the knife you gotta tell us who you like,” Mike teased.

“I’m not telling you, it’s a secret,” Max quipped.

“Man, how old are you turning?” Steve called to her.

“Fifteen,” she said.

“Fifteen...,” Steve muttered.

Max and her friends fell to chattering, Susan handing out cake. She came over and gave Billy and Steve a slice.

“Think of how I feel,” Billy snorted, taking a bite of cake. “She was ten when I met her, next year she’ll be terrorizing the roads of Hawkins.”

“It’s so weird,” Steve said through his bite of cake. “At least to me, anyway. I don’t have any siblings, so I’m not used to kids growin’ up like this. I mean, it doesn’t seem like a lot but... I dunno. Thirteen and fifteen are different, I guess.”

Billy shrugged. Max had been so small when he’d first met her, a tiny little freckled thing with big blue eyes and a frowning mouth. He remembered when Neil had first introduced them, six years ago, bringing him into the living room, his arms possessively on her shoulders.

“This is your new sister, Maxine,” he had said, all of a silent threat humming underneath his voice.

“It’s Max,” she'd corrected, her little voice so small but so brave. They’d stared each other down, both of them too stubborn to learn to like one another and too angry at their parents for forcing them together to try. When he had first met Max, he’d hated her. She was the annoying result of this woman who had come into his life to replace his own Mom. He’d felt she had no right to be sharing a house with him. He knew now it wasn’t her fault, that she was just as much of a victim to an adult’s whims as he was, but it’d been easier to blame her, to be mean to her and get away with it, than it was to fight his Dad. After a while, his hatred had simmered to distaste. By the time he was fourteen he wasn’t spending much time at home anyways, and by fifteen he barely came home at all, which had suited them both just fine. He’d always been tasked with babysitting her, but he always snuck out the moment they were alone. Then one day

she ran away, and his father blamed him for it. He had never asked her why she'd run away.

He was afraid of the answer.

He turned his ear toward the kitchen, listening to her laugh, listening to her tease her friends as they ate junk food. She was telling Lucas about something, giggling.He realized that both he and Max were runaways. When things got too bad, too confusing, full of too much hurt... They ran. Billy felt like he had been running his whole life, away from the things that had happened to him, away from who he really was... He was glad that Max, at least, wasn't running anymore. When these little dorks had called in their time of need, she'd answered, fearlessly. Their relationship over the past six years had been a turbulent mix of disdain and mild protectiveness, but now… A feeling was winding its way through his chest, something that had been growing quietly for a long time. He finally recognized it for what it was: pride. Max was brave and intelligent, and he was proud of her.

"S'good cake," Steve complimented, his mouth full, calling out to Susan.

"Thank you!" she called back.

Billy finished his cake and turned around, reaching for the counter. Finding it, he put his plate on it and swung back to his perch against the kitchen entryway, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it. He sighed, one leg bent, smoking and tuned in to the conversation at the dinner table, where Max was opening gifts from her friends.
"Okay— It's really stupid," Dustin giggled.

"It's fine!" Max laughed.

"And this one is from your lover," Mike announced in a baby voice, making kissing noises.

"Ugh, gross Mike!" Max yelled, pushing him away as he laughed.

He listened to Max ripping the paper off of a gift. She paused, quiet for a moment. He couldnt' tell if she was happy or pissed off.

“I know it’s hokey,” Lucas said self-consciously, “I just... I dunno, it was nice...”

Steve leaned in and whispered in his ear.

“Lucas got her this really nice necklace,” Steve said, grinning.

Billy smirked. As tough as Max was, he knew she couldn’t resist a nice romantic gift like that. Typical chick. He snorted softly and tucked his hair behind his ear, his fingers brushing up against the crystal stud Steve had given him that had been in his earlobe since Christmas. His hand froze and he hastily brought it away from his face, his cheeks flushing. He crossed his arms and cleared his throat, taking a long drag of his cigarette.

After the gifts, Max and her friends invaded the living room and put on a movie, leaving Steve and Billy to themselves. Steve helped Susan clean a little, then followed Billy as he went to his room, eager to get away from the junior crowd for at least a little bit. Billy knew he’d been loud and obnoxious at that age, but still... Billy groaned as he lay down on his bed, swinging an arm behind his head, grabbing his ashtray from the side table and putting it on his chest. Steve climbed in right beside him, taking one of his pillows and stuffing it at the foot of the bed, crossing his feet and shuffling them into Billy’s side. Billy flicked his sock feet with a finger distastefully.

“You wanna maybe get those nasty feet outta my armpit?”

“They’re not nasty,” Steve protested.

“You’re not the one whose nose is near ‘em, Steve,” Billy snorted, crushing his cigarette into the ashtray and lighting another one.

“Whatever, like you can smell anything, smoke stack,” Steve teased, flicking one of his toes into Billy’s side. Billy rolled his eyes as Steve pulled out a pack of smokes and lit one for himself. They smoked in silence for a bit, the mattress creaking when Steve sat up to tap his in the tray on Billy’s chest.

“Max was ten when you met her, so you were what— Thirteen?” Steve asked.

“Yeah,” Billy nodded. “Around that.”

“I can’t picture little you,” Steve chuckled. “Every time I do, it’s just like… You but smaller, with a moustache, muscles, and all…”

“Well… I was skinny, if you’ll believe it…,” Billy laughed. “I had big curly hair, like really untameable… I guess I looked a lot different, but still kinda the same.” Billy blinked. “Actually, I think I got a picture. Go look in my closet, there’s a photo album.”

Steve got up from the bed and rummaged through his closet. He was a little surprised at himself with how open he was being with his room, but then again, he really didn’t have anything to hide. It wasn’t exactly the end of the world if Steve found his girly mags. He adjusted himself on the bed, taking a puff of his cigarette, and then froze.

Well. There were *other* magazines in there too he should probably be worried about… He tried desperately for a moment to remember where they were hidden to distract Steve from finding them when Steve made a noise of triumph.

“Found it!” he announced.

Billy let out a little sigh of relief. He either hadn’t found these other magazines, or he had politely refused to say anything about them. Billy desperately hoped it was the former.

“Alright,” Steve said gleefully, sitting on his bed, “let’s see baby Billy…”

He opened it. “Awwww,” he cooed, laughing, “Holy shit, you look like a little angel…”

“Proof that looks can be deceiving,” Billy snorted.

He listened as Steve rifled through the album, pausing every once in a while to make a comment. Billy knew there weren’t many pictures in that album to begin with, and certainly not many since his mother left when he was eight. She had been the one who’d taken most of the pictures before then, and any in the interim between her leaving and Susan arriving were flukes. The album stopped after Billy turned

fourteen, the last picture a photo of him that Harley had taken. In the picture he looked pissed off, leaning against a wall. It was the mood he'd been in since he was eight and it was the mood he'd been stuck in ever since.

"That's a lot of hair," Steve chuckled softly.

Steve's comments had slowly stopped as he went through the album, and he knew it was because he could see him getting unhappier, see the scarcity of the pictures, and watch as his Mom disappeared.

"Yeah," he said, with no real feeling behind it. "Always had a lot of hair."

"You were a cute kid," Steve said, closing the album.

Billy didn't really know what to say to that. His being cute hadn't made much of a difference. Steve got up from the bed and put the album back.

"Me, on the other hand...," he said, walking back across the room toward him. "I was a dorky lookin' kid."

Billy grinned. "I'd like to see that someday."

"Okay, meet you out in the car," Steve called, leaving out of the front door after Mike, Lucas, and Dustin.

Billy heard the storm door shut and was left alone in the hallway with Max as he tied his boots. When he straightened up, he could tell she was still there, her weight rocking back and forth and making the crooked floorboards creak. Something was burning on his tongue that he wanted to say to her, something he wanted her to know. It was just a feeling, something that he couldn't name. He licked his lips and beckoned gently with his hand.

"C'mere," he said quietly.

"You better not give me a noogie," Max warned.

Billy snorted. "S'not a noogie. Promise."

She came in close to him, and he reached tentatively for her. Unsure, his heart beating fast in his chest, his cheeks flushed a little with embarrassment, he wrapped his arms around her.

They were not a hugging family— Never had been. But he knew the relief he felt when Robin casually threw her arm around him, knew the calming of his soul when Steve touched him reassuringly. He knew he would screw up saying the things he wanted to tell Max, so he hugged her instead. She froze for a moment before wrapping her arms around him too, burying her head in his chest.

Then he pulled away, almost overwhelmed, and Max jumped away just as quickly.

“See you later,” Max said, her voice a little too high pitched to be casual.

“Yeah,” he agreed, his own voice constricted.

He stood in the doorway for a moment, nodded, then walked outside.

Billy leaned his head back against the headrest, feeling oddly exhausted. He closed his eyes, letting the May breeze drift in through the crack in the passenger side window, listening to the three boys in the backseat chattering away. They were debating something, talking about time travel and *Back to the Future* and other crap he didn’t care to know about.

“Steve— You saw the movie— Don’t you agree that if they went back in time, the events would be inherently as they always were because otherwise it would introduce a completely new timeline?” Dustin demanded.

Steve snorted, turning his signal light on. “Dustin, I saw that movie when I was drugged up on Russian truth serum, all I remember is that the younger version of the kid’s mom wanted to have sex with him...”

“ *THAT’S WHAT I SAID!* ” Lucas yelled.

“Whatever! The point stands, the effect of going back in time means that it was something that already happened!”

“Time don’t exist except for things that die,” Billy said, shrugging, weighing in sleepily. He was totally talking out of his ass, but he felt like stirring the pot a little.

“Bro, what?” Mike asked, snorting.

“That’s... Actually a really interesting point...” Dustin said. “I mean... Do animals have a concept of time? They must... You think?”

“I personally think it’s time you boys got out of my car,” Steve chuckled, coming to a stop. He was dropping them off at Mike’s.

“Thanks for the ride,” Mike said.

“Yeah, thanks,” Lucas chimed in.

“You know, Billy,” Dustin said, leaning forward, his hands on either side of front seats. “You’re actually terrifying—“

“Thanks,” Billy said.

“—and you always scared the shit out of all of us... But I gotta say, when it’s on our side? It’s kinda awesome.”

Billy turned his head, smirking. “Get outta here,” he said, jerking his head toward the door. Dustin let out a gleeful laugh, and the boys shuffled out of the backseat. Billy turned to the front and blinked, his smirk falling, a jumble of emotions knotting inside his gut. *Terrifying...* Without realizing what he was doing, he got out of the car, closing the passenger side door behind him.

“Lucas?” he called.

There was a pause.

“Yeah?” Lucas called back, hesitantly.

“Can uh... Can I talk to you a second?” Billy asked him, licking his lips.

"... Okay."

He told Dustin and Mike to go inside, and Billy listened as his footsteps came closer.

But not too close.

"Listen, man... I'm not too good at this shit, but... I just wanna say... I'm sorry for hurtin' you, back then..." Billy rubbed the back of his head, his jaw clenching. "I— There isn't an excuse for what I did. My Dad is a dick, and he raised a dick. I'm just... Shit. I dunno..."

Billy fumbled for a cigarette and lit it. "Anyways," he mumbled. "I'll just go..."

He didn't deserve forgiveness so he didn't ask for it. He just wanted Lucas to know he was sorry, that in his fucked up world the way he'd treated him and Max was somehow to protect them, that his monstrous behaviour had made sense to him then but didn't anymore. He turned around, his hand on the car door handle.

"Wait," Lucas called out. Billy listened as he came nearer. He paused, turning back around.

"Me, Dustin, Mike, and Will had a rule, back in the day. If you screwed up and fought, the person who apologized had to offer the secret shake. We used to spit in our hands and then shake hands... It was kinda stupid, and kinda gross... But... If you shook hands, it was okay again. It meant both people forgave each other..."

Billy blinked, swallowing, a tiny smile forming in the corners of his mouth. He flicked his cigarette to the ground, crushing it with his boot, then lifted his hand to his face. He spat into his palm, extending his hand out in front of him. He heard Lucas let out a breath of laughter, and then spit into his hand. He came forward and they shook. Billy turned their hands around so they were clasped, holding up their fists like they were going to arm wrestle. He took his other arm and pulled Lucas in, giving him a brief hug before letting go, letting their hands fall.

"Thank you for taking care of Max," he said quietly, sincerely. He

wasn't sure how well she would have endured without Lucas' around.

"Sure," Lucas said, his voice light. An awkward but not unpleasant moment lapsed between them.

"I'm gonna go in, but... I accept your apology," Lucas said, backing away.

Billy nodded. Lucas' voice gave a lot away about what was unsaid, namely, the violence that he and Max had endured. She'd probably told Lucas everything, after Neil had finally been pushed out of their lives. Billy knew that he had a lot of work to do to re-earn Lucas' trust, but all he could do was apologize and vow to do better.

An apology, he had learned, was a good start.

13. "I Want To Know What Love Is" – Foreigner (1984)

June 3rd, 1986

“You going to prom?” Steve asked, calling out to Robin from behind an armful of tapes. It was a quarter after eight on a Monday night, and their shifts at Family Video ended in five minutes. The store was blessedly empty, the last customer having left a few minutes ago. He peeked over the top of the shelf at her where she was re-arranging a snack display by the front counter.

She snorted derisively, her back to him.

“No,” she called back.

“Oh, I see,” Steve nodded, a teasing smile on his face. “You’re too cool for prom.”

He put a movie back, going along the aisle.

“No,” Robin said shortly. “I’m not too cool for prom.”

“Then why not?” Steve asked, putting a copy of *After Hours* on the shelf.

Robin made a small noise in her throat, and Steve turned around, giving her his full attention. He knew that noise— It usually preceded some kind of seriousness.

“Promise you won’t make fun of me?” she asked him, her voice a small, kneeling down in front of the counter holding a box of Mars bars. She looked up at him, a wince on her face.

“Of course,” he promised, leaning on the shelf.

“Well... I wanted to go with Harley,” she confessed, sighing, “but she’s in California, and... I don’t think I can invite her anyways… I dunno if it would be… *Allowed* .”

"Hm,” Steve hummed.

The truth was that Harley *was* coming to Hawkins in time for Robin and Nancy's prom— Robin just didn't know it yet. Billy had called him the week before to let him know. Harley wanted it to be a surprise, and she tasked the both of them with finessing the situation so that Harley could attend, under the guise of being someone's date, when in reality she was Robin's date. He looked at Robin's face, upset in that resigned and calm way that she always expressed her sadness, turning away from him and back to the snacks.

"Well... What if you took your friend Eric?" he asked.

"He's going with Tasha," she said, "and Dar is going with Nat."

"Nat?" Steve asked, furrowing his brow. The name seemed familiar somehow.

"Oh, just someone," Robin shrugged.

Steve bit his lip. This was going to be harder than he expected. It was looking more and more like they were going to have to sneak Harley in somehow...

"Well, why don't you take Billy, then?" he asked her, smiling.

Robin laughed. "Oh my God," she giggled. "That would be something else..."

"It would!" Steve snorted, grinning. "But, I mean, at least he'd be fun."

"Yeah," Robin nodded, a smirk on her face. She seemed to be warming up to the idea, thinking it over. If they were going to have to sneak Harley into the gym on the 23rd, it would be easier if Billy was also there when Steve sent her in.

"Is Jonathan coming down to take Nancy?" Steve asked curiously. Nancy hadn't even so much as mentioned prom the last few times they had all been together.

"No," Robin said. "I don't think he is."

Steve was surprised. He knew Jonathan and Nancy had broken up, or

at least, had experienced some trouble, but he never thought that Jonathan wouldn't bring her to prom. Though, to be fair to him and his family... Coming back to Hawkins was probably not in their best interest. Aside from Billy and Eleven, they had experienced the brunt of the horrific atrocities that had occurred in the town. They probably just wanted to get away from it all, and stay away. He couldn't really blame them.

"Steve!"

"Hm?" he jumped, looking up. Robin was right in front of him, on the other side of the shelf. She gave him a knowing look and crossed her arms over the top of the shelf, her hands folded.

"I know what you're thinking," she said, in a sing-song voice.

"No," Steve snorted, shaking his head. "No way!"

"You were totally thinking it," she accused, smirking.

"No! I actually wasn't..."

"I don't believe you!"

"Robin!" Steve griped, frowning. "I'm not gonna ask Nancy to prom, okay? Look, I forgive her and all, but... She did kinda break my heart and taking her to prom isn't something I'm all that interested in doing."

"Oooookay," she said, rolling her eyes and stepping back, putting up her palms in surrender. "Fine. Whatever."

"Ask Billy, he'd love to go with you," Steve called at her as she walked away toward the door, locking it.

"You really think I should go to prom with Billy Hargrove?" she asked, grinning goofily as she moved behind the counter and opened the cash register.

"Yeah," Steve shrugged, smirking, picking up his stack of VHS tapes and continuing with his task. "I mean, imagine the looks on people's faces. He's no Harley, but at least you'll have a good time with him."

“That’s true,” she said, shrugging, pulling out the bills and laying them on the counter.

“You know,” Steve said, finishing putting away his stack. “I never thought you’d be into the whole prom thing.”

“Me neither,” Robin snorted ruefully, sorting the bills, “But it’s like this weird prom fever took over everybody in the last two months and even us nerdy kids are sadly not immune...”

“I mean, it is kind of a big deal,” Steve shrugged, trying to be enthusiastic for Robin’s sake. He had gone stag to his prom and it had been super lame. He’d had an awful time. He didn’t tell Robin that, though— She still had the chance to have the time of her life. Just because his prom sucked didn’t mean hers had to. He thought about Nancy, and hoped she had a backup date planned, maybe one of her and Barb’s friends from before. Deep down, he knew she didn’t.

“I guess it’s a big deal. It sort of doesn’t feel real,” Robin said.

“Yeah,” Steve shrugged, putting the last tape away and coming to stand near the counter. He crossed his arms. “Suddenly, it’ll be a year since you graduated and you’ll be going to the University of California, going to bars every night with Harley, and becoming even more of a know it all than you are now.” He grinned, giving her a small, affectionate shove. She smiled down at the bills, her mouth whispering the numbers she was counting. After she was done, she put her palms on the counter and gave him a devilish smirk.

“And one day, your Dad will finally give you a job, you’ll find someone who can tolerate your blabbermouth, get married to them, have two point five children and a dog, and fall asleep every night in your armchair at six thirty to *M*A*S*H* reruns.”

“Oh Jesus,” Steve said, clutching his heart. “Next time, just punch me, alright? That’d be nicer...”

She patted him sympathetically on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Steve,” she sighed, her eyes crinkled in humour. “You’ll look great in a sweater vest.”

June 10th, 1986

Steve lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, his green phone pulled onto the bed beside him. He licked his lips, his arms crossed over his belly, rehearsing what he was going to say. Robin's face swam into his vision, her eyebrows engaged in full *I Told You So* mode. He brought his palms up to his eye sockets and rubbed them vigorously. He needed advice. He was going to ask Nancy if she wanted to go with him to her prom. He really wasn't sure if this was a good idea, or if she'd even want him to. He didn't want it to lead anywhere. He didn't want it to be romantic. He didn't want her to think he was still hung up on her. He just knew there was something unfinished in their relationship, some sort of end that he knew could be pleasant for both of them and forge a new and better path for their relationship. He just didn't know if she would take it that way.

Instead of dialling the Wheeler's, he dialled Billy.

"Lo'?" Billy answered, his mouth full.

"Hey, it's Steve," Steve sighed.

"Whussup?" Billy asked, his lips smacking around some kind of snack.

"Oh, nothing, just... Wondering if it's a good idea to ask Nancy to prom," Steve sighed, putting his hand on his forehead. "Y'know, cause I'm a fucking idiot. Am I fucking idiot?"

"I mean, yeah," Billy said, swallowing his food. *"You're dumb as fuck, but that's not the issue."*

"Ha ha ha," Steve said, rolling his eyes.

"Are you sure you're not still in love with this chick?" Billy asked him, sounding doubtful.

"No," Steve grimaced. "I'm not. I'm really not... I just, like... She doesn't have a date, and she's had a bad time, and I feel like we have unfinished business, like... I want to officially end our relationship as it was and start somethin' new... If that makes any fuckin' sense."

He heard Billy biting into something, and it sounded like an apple. He chewed for several seconds.

"Mm," he said at last. *"Does* she *need you to take her to prom, or do* you *need to take her to prom?"*

Steve closed his eyes. He knew if he hadn't wanted a blunt assessment of his feelings, he shouldn't have called Billy… But as painful as the assessment was, he knew he had to hear it.

"Okay," Steve sighed. "Yeah, alright. Maybe it's just me."

"Well, maybe it's her too— But it's definitely you, y'know?"

"So, you think I should ask her?" Steve asked, sitting up, his hand tangling anxiously in the phone cord.

"Yeah," Billy said, taking another bite. *"W'hus thuh t'looos?"*

"What?"

Billy chewed frantically and swallowed. *"I said, what's there to lose?"*

"I dunno... I guess you're right," Steve sighed. "I just don't want her to take it wrong..."

"Then tell her that, dumbass," Billy laughed. *"Just be like... 'Hey, if you don't got a date, why don't I take you? Just as friends.'"*

"Do you wanna ask her for me?" Steve groaned.

"No way, amigo," Billy said.

"Ugh... Alright," Steve sighed, uncurling the phone cord from the rat's nest he'd made of it.

"I mean, you don't actually gotta ask her, you know," Billy said, snorting. *"Jesus, Steve… You act like you gotta give up everything you got for every sad sack of shit that crosses your path. Just cause you feel like that doesn't mean you gotta do somethin' about it..."*

"No, no, no...," Steve protested. "I want to take her. I wanna go. I

think—“

“Stop thinking then, and just ask her. I can smell the smoke of your brain overheating from here.”

“Oh, shut up...,” Steve sighed. “Alright. You’re right. I should ask her. It’ll be fun.”

“It’ll be fun,” Billy agreed.

“I'm gonna tell her we’re going as friends.”

“Just as friends,” Billy agreed.

“Okay. I’m hanging up. I’m gonna call her.”

“Okay,” Billy said, around a chunk of apple. *“Good luck.”*

“I’ll need it,” Steve muttered. They said goodbye and hung up. Steve licked his lips and dialled the Wheeler’s house.

It rang a few times, and Mrs. Wheeler answered.

“Hey, Mrs. Wheeler! It’s Steve. Is Nancy there?”

June 12th, 1986

“Oh God,” Robin whispered, horrified. Her reflection stared back at her.

Her body was ensconced in shiny, itchy fabric, twelve pounds worth of fuchsia tulle cascading from her shoulders, matching the bottom hem of the gown which was adorned in layers of pink like a neon cake.

“Hm,” Nancy said, very politely.

“No,” Steve snorted, shaking his head at her in the mirror.

“Not no!” Nancy hissed, smacking his arm. Her voice lowered. “What if she loves it?”

“Uh, I don’t love it, Nance,” Robin said, her eyes wide, her mouth twisted, “I look like a neon sign threw up on a skinned duck...”

Billy, who was lounging on a chair near the rack of dresses her and Nancy had picked, guffawed. Robin stepped off of the platform and strode toward the fitting room, grabbing a black dress off of the rack and sliding the curtain shut.

Inside the tiny four walls of the fitting room, confronted with her own image in a full length mirror, she swallowed hard and tried not to cry. She felt stupid trying on all of these dresses. None of them suited her. She wasn’t used to wearing anything fancy, and her Mom sure as hell couldn’t really afford a nice dress... She was the one inflicting this pain on herself, paying for her own overpriced, miserable stack of ugly fabric and rhinestones. She tore the pink dress off of her like it was poison, hanging it on the rack beside her. She looked at the black dress she had grabbed and closed her eyes, sniffing, wiping her eyes. She slowly put on the black dress, her face mottled red. She did a jaunty post, smiling at herself. An oversized bow in that strange, crinkly, sparkling fabric waved under her chin. She deflated, reaching around and yanking the zipper down.

“Hey, you good?” Steve called to her softly through the curtain.

“No,” she grumbled, hoping she didn’t sound like she was crying.

“That black dress any good?”

“No,” she repeated, throwing it onto the hanger and putting it on the rack.

“Well, here, I’ll put them back,” Steve offered, his hand appearing inside the fitting room with her. She dutifully handed them off to him, standing awkwardly in her underwear, and he retreated. She crossed her arms over her chest, taking a few deep breaths, trying to calm down. She wasn’t gonna let a stupid prom dress get to her. She was only going because Steve had goaded her, and no other reason. Harley couldn’t come, there was no way she could even be there if she did show up... So she blamed Steve and his sentimentalism for her predicament. She looked down at her clothes piled on the floor and gave up, pulling on her shirt.

She knew she wasn't immune to the way that she and every girl in America was told from the moment they were born that one day they'd be princesses, that one day they'd be beautiful. She knew it was horse shit. She knew it was sexist. She knew it was totally fucking dumb... But knowing and feeling were too different things. She felt like she was failing at being a girl going to prom, like she wasn't measuring up to the ideal that had been shoved down hers and every other girl's throats from the moment they could understand what pretty dresses were. She closed her eyes, holding her shirt and gritted her teeth. She wouldn't cry because some bullshit company was failing to sell her the dream of being a pretty princess. She *wouldn't.*

Steve's hand appeared on the side of the curtain, holding a big white dress. Robin looked at it and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. This was what she was talking about, this kind of dress right here… The perfect stupid fantasy.

"Steve—Really? That thing is ridiculous...," she moaned, giving it a disgusted look.

"Just try it!" he called. "Come on—Last one! Just for fun."

She sighed heavily and grabbed it from him, closing the curtains all the way, and held it in front of her.

It was gigantic. It was a pure white gown, puffy sleeves that hung around the shoulder, a tight bodice, and a very wide skirt that was layered in tulle meshed with rhinestones. She caught the price tag fluttering beside her and looked at it. She snorted in laughter. There was no fucking way. Still— It might be fun to try on something a little on the ridiculous side. If she was failing at being a princess at prom, she could at least have a laugh with her friends about it.

She put it on. As she zipped it up in the back, she caught herself in the mirror and paused. The rhinestones sparkled. The skirt swished. The sleeves, puffy and stupid as they were, were soft on her skin. She stared down at it, arranging the skirt, adjusting the bodice. *Oh no,* she thought vaguely to herself. *Oh no* …

She *liked* it.

She looked up at the white curtain separating her from her friends. Just for fun, Steve had said. Was he just joking? Would they laugh when she walked out? Robin couldn't tell what was worse; knowing that the whole beautiful princess thing was a load of crap and failing at it, or feeling like a princess in a stupid overpriced dress she could never afford. She closed her eyes and put on a smirk that didn't reach her eyes. If they laughed she'd be prepared.

She flicked the curtains open and strode out.

Steve was waiting for her near the mirror, his arms crossed. When he saw her, he smiled wide and warm, his brown eyes soft. Nancy came forward, letting out a little gasp. He held out a hand and dutifully led her up and onto the pedestal. Nobody was laughing. Steve was looking at her so lovingly, and Nancy was tracing her hands on the fabric of the skirt, arranging it, smiling. Her confident smirk faded, replaced with someone more genuine. She looked at herself from all angles, the way it dipped in the back, the way the neckline scooped perfectly, like an arrow. Holding it in front of herself, it had seemed impossibly large, but wearing it... It didn't seem as big. It fit her.

"You like it, don't you?" Steve grinned, looking up at her.

"Shut up," she grumbled, unable to hide the flush of pink that had bloomed across her face.

"You look incredible!" Nancy gushed, as though she could barely contain herself.

"You look sexy, Rob," Billy called out, smiling, from his chair.

"Fine," she admitted, arranging the skirt. She swallowed hard. "Fine, I do. I like it."

She looked down and saw the tag fluttering, the high price looking back at her. Not one to be totally defeated when kicked down, she lifted her head.

"I'll try and find something similar," she said calmly, nodding and going to step down from the pedestal.

"Don't worry about it," Steve shrugged.

“Yeah,” Robin sighed. “Can you actually go and see if you can find something like this, Steve? Over in the sale section?”

“No, you’re not gettin’ me,” Steve snorted, flicking her arm teasingly with his thumb and middle finger. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Steve, I mean, I kind of have to— Oh.” Robin blinked rapidly. “No,” she said flatly. “No way! You are not paying for this!”

“Shut up, Robin,” Billy called. “He’s payin’ for it.”

“No!” she protested, “but— Nancy—“

“Mine’s paid for already!” Nancy smiled softly. “I bought mine ages ago...”

“You can’t just—“

“I don’t want my date lookin’ like trash, Robin, so you better get that fuckin’ dress or I’ll have to steal it,” Billy called.

Robin was stunned. “Wh—“

She licked her lips and started again.

“Why?” she demanded, searching Steve’s face.

“Isn’t it your birthday on prom?” Steve smiled.

Robin closed her eyes. She nodded. “Yeah...”

“Well,” Steve said, his eyes glinting mischievously. “Happy birthday, then.”

Robin looked down at the dress. “God,” she said, her voice cracking. “You’re so cheesy, Steve…”

She sniffed, rubbing her eyes, crying in earnest. “Fuck you…”

“Love you too,” he said, helping her down from the platform and rubbing her back.

He was grinning from ear to ear.

Billy listened to the hubbub of Steve talking with a sales person and helping Robin back into the fitting room with a small smile on his face. He'd had a funny feeling that Steve had planned all along to pay for Robin's gown, considering they knew that Harley was coming and was going to see her in it. Even though he'd sort of expected it, Steve's kindness floored him. It always floored him. Each time he did something nice, Billy was amazed. He'd grown up being taught that kindness was something you rationed, like a rare commodity, bringing out only if you had to. Steve, big heart that he had, showed him time and time again that this was wrong. Steve always had more room for someone in his heart, and for some reason his kindness made Billy feel light, like whatever happiness Steve caused was reflected back on him somehow. He supposed it was just pride in knowing that someone so thoughtful had believed he was worth knowing. He could tell Robin was crying a little, and it touched him. She deserved something beautiful, something elaborate, something nice. Nancy sat beside him, letting out a heavy, quiet sigh.

"You wish your lover boy was here, huh?" Billy asked her, nudging her arm.

"No...," she muttered.

"Yeah you do," Billy snorted, taking out a cigarette from the breast pocket of his button up shirt, flicking his zippo. He let out a breath of smoke.

"Fine," she said, letting out a small, sad laugh. "Alright. Yeah. I wish he was here. But... I know why he isn't… It just doesn't feel that great."

"I know," Billy said. He reached out tentatively and put his palm on her shoulders. He rarely touched Nancy, because Nancy wasn't someone who tended to invite touch, not like Robin and Steve. She reminded him of himself in a weird and twisted way, like their minds went in similar places, their hearts always simmering and ready to burst into flames at any time.

"Can you pass me the ashtray?" he asked her, and she obliged him.

“Thanks,” he said quietly. He listened to Robin and Steve chatter, and smiled softly. “He’s so good to her, huh?” he said, rubbing his mouth with his hand. He thought about Max and how she would probably be in this exact boutique in three years’ time and let out a little sigh. He hoped his sight was back before then. He’d made up his mind to pay for her prom dress long ago, back in L.A. He’d planned it as a parting gift, an apology, a last goodbye before he never spoke to her again. Then, everything had changed.

“He is,” Nancy said, her voice quiet and proud. “He’s really good to her. He’s good to all of us.”

Billy tilted his head, nodding. He supposed she had a lot to do with the way Steve was now. From how Steve talked about her and their relationship, he’d learned a lot about himself through her. He’d once told him that he’d loved her so much he’d been willing to finally stop doing what everyone expected him to do and stand up for himself for once. He blinked slowly. He knew about that kind of love, or at least, was getting to know it slowly. He thought about Nancy and wondered how she’d become so quiet, burning so quietly with anger and sadness. He guessed that maybe she’d given away too much of herself, and now she was feeling empty. She’d lost more than she’d gained, and he could tell it was eating away at her. There was nothing left in Hawkins for Nancy anymore. Billy had come to respect her greatly, her tenacity most of all, even though he felt he didn’t really know her that wall. He knew it was intentional, that she was holding all of them at arm’s length. He’d done that after Harley had finally left him, and had done it when he’d come to Hawkins. He understood why. When you kept getting hurt and losing people, over and over, sometimes it felt easier just to keep them away.

Billy’s lips twisted as he listened to Robin coming out of the fitting room. He wished he had the right words to tell her that he respected her and that he knew things would get better for her… But he’d always struggled with expressing himself, and she was already getting up and walking away.

He let out a small sigh and hoped one day she would find whatever she was looking for.

June 23rd, 1986

Steve spritzed some hairspray, flicking his wrist, sending a mist of Farrah Fawcett over Billy's curls. He fluffed them with his fingers, wrinkling his nose as the spray tickled his nostrils. Billy was sitting on the counter of his parents' bathroom, his legs dangling down by the cupboards, patiently letting Steve do his hair. Steve smirked a little as he twirled a little curl in front of Billy's eyes.

"There," he said, satisfied. "I even got that little curl in front that you like so much."

Billy hopped off the counter, leaning against it, tentatively touching his hair.

"Hm, seems okay," he said, wrapping the little curl in front of his eyes around his finger and letting it go.

"Of course it's okay. This is Steve ' *The Hair* ' Harrington you're talkin' to, buddy..."

Billy snorted, leaning on an elbow against the counter, facing Steve. "That's still the stupidest goddamn nickname I've ever heard in my entire life, and I knew a guy nicknamed Footie."

"Footie?" Steve repeated, playing with his hair in the mirror, spraying a little Farrah on the back.

"Yeah. He had big fuckin' feet... And even that nickname is better than 'The Hair,'" Billy snorted.

"It wasn't a nickname, Billy, it was a reputation thing," Steve protested, rolling his eyes. "And whatever, *Baby* . What the hell kind of a nickname for a guy is *Baby* anyways?"

"One for a sweet widdle boy!" Harley's voice called.

Steve turned around, grinning as she came striding into the bathroom. She was wearing a strapless dress that came to just past her knees in a brilliant, shiny blue. The corset sat close to her chest until just below her natural waist, where the skirt of the dress flared in tiers. The back had a large bow. She was carrying a pair of black

kitten heels in one hand and was holding her hair into a pile on her head with the other. She dropped her heels onto the floor by the sink and took her tight, bright red curls into both of her hands.

“Yeah,” Steve said in a baby voice, reaching out and pinching Billy’s cheek. “A sweet widdle baby boy…”

Billy grinned. “Whatever, I got to be everyone’s ‘baby.’ You can’t say as much, can you, Harrington?”

“Aright, alright,” Steve said, rolling his eyes.

“ *He’s got to be somebody’s baby,* ” Harley sang, swaying, grinning as she clipped her hair on her head, “ *He’s so fine! Yeaaaah!”*

“He’s probably somebooooody’s only light, gonna shine tonight! Yeaaah!” Steve joined in, throwing his arms around Billy’s shoulders and rocking him violently to the slow beat of the song.

Harley laughed, gesturing at Steve. “Hand me the Farrah, would ya?”

He took back his arm from Billy and threw it to her. She sprayed her hair, trying to set it in place.

“Coming in with the corsages!” Steve’s mother trilled, coming into the room with a basket of flowers. She flipped her atomic blonde hair and grinned at them.

“Oh, you all look so wonderful...,” she gushed.

When he told his Mom he’d be taking Nancy to prom, she’d practically had a fit. He thought he might have severely deprived her of some grade A fussing by going stag to his own prom, and now she had a whole squad of young people to fuss over.

“Oh, Harley, dear, you look stunning,” Sandra fawned, coming to stand beside her and straightening out some of the tiers of the dress. “Oh! Such a beautiful dress…”

“Thanks, Mrs. Harrington,” Harley smiled graciously. She’d gotten a real kick out of Sandra Harrington the last time she had come to visit,

and had been able to spend a little more time with her once she arrived again in Hawkins a couple days ago. Steve had offered to host her, seeing as he had the room and it was the best way to keep Robin out of the loop.

“Alright,” Sandra sighed wistfully, patting Harley on the shoulders and looking longingly into their reflection. She moved away, tapping Steve on the arm.

“Okay, boys, go get dressed. I have to get your corsages on you...,” she said, taking Billy by the arm and handing him off to Steve. He took Billy’s hand and led him through the house to his room where their clothes hung above his bedroom door. He closed the door behind them, and sat Billy on his bed.

“Alright,” Steve said, blowing his bangs out of his face. “Let’s go...”

He handed Billy his tux. It was simple and black, with a white dress shirt— Classic. Steve’s, on the other hand, was white. He had never thought white would be the way he’d have gone, but somehow it had spoken to him. The tuxedo was simply constructed, but had a pink bowtie and buttons. It matched Nancy’s dress very well, which was a blush pink.

Steve dressed methodically, his mind wandering. He had worn a tuxedo a few times before, at some of his Dad’s more fancy company functions, at his cousin’s wedding... He pulled on the slacks and then a dress shirt, tucking it in. The jacket, and finally, the bow tie. He tied it expertly in the long mirror on his wall, having watched his father tie ties and bow ties his entire life. When he was a kid, he used to go to his Dad’s room in the morning and copy him as he got ready for work. Eventually his Dad had caught on, giving him an old tie to put on so they could do it together every morning. Steve had loved putting on his tie with his Dad. He smiled softly to himself. His Dad could be a dick, but he was gentle in some ways. He *did* truly love his son, even if he sometimes didn’t show it right. It was a good memory.

He adjusted the bow of his tie, satisfied. He looked behind him in the long mirror at Billy, who somehow managed to make his black tuxedo look casual. He looked like he was stuffed a little

uncomfortably into his formal wear, like he was too much for the clothing that was trying to tame him. The tux seemed to lose its sleekness in various places in a way that was just so typically Billy—Devilishly dishevelled. Steve knew that no matter what he did to straighten those lines, to smooth out his appearance, they would return within seconds just to spite him. So, instead, he came over, smiling, and reached out to help him with his bow tie, which he was struggling to tie.

“Here,” Steve chuckled, pulling him to his feet. He lifted his hands to Billy’s throat, and Billy’s hands fell to his sides.

“I’m good at this stuff,” Steve murmured, grinning, tilting his head to get a better look at what he was doing. There was a trick to it, one he had mastered over years of practice. Billy lifted his chin and let him work, breathing calmly.

“Of course you are, rich boy,” Billy teased, the corners of his mouth quirking.

“Oh, hush,” Steve scolded gently, smiling, finishing off the bow tie. He adjusted it and moved his head back a little, taking in Billy’s appearance. Unconsciously, his hands moved from Billy’s bow tie to sweep across the front of his shoulders, stopping there, his palms splayed across the thick black fabric of his tuxedo jacket. He paused, looking him up and down. Billy lowered his head, blinking slowly, his ghostlike grin fading a little.

He knew what that look meant. It was the small furrow in Billy’s brow, the clench of his jaw... The little ways he showed that he was upset that he couldn’t see what the world had to offer. But Steve knew. He knew that he was brave and practical for the majority of the time, happy to be alive at all... But sometimes, like today, he would catch his falling smile, the little dip of his mood.

“You look really handsome,” Steve told him, his voice quiet.

“Thanks,” Billy replied quietly. He stilled.

Then, he reached a hand out nervously and put it feather-light on Steve’s cheek. Steve blinked, startled. Billy’s other hand followed.

Slowly, his fingers traced the contours of his face, the hollows and bumps of the bones beneath his flesh, the bounce of his hair, the little curl at the back of his head that stubbornly flicked in the opposite direction no matter what he sprayed or scrubbed on it.

“Your nose is still straight... Somehow,” Billy snorted, amazed.

“Yeah,” Steve murmured, smiling. “It's not too bad.”

Billy’s hands retreated, mirroring him, splaying across Steve’s shoulders.

“You look... Handsome too,” Billy said haltingly, blinking. “I know you do.”

Steve was struck. Billy rarely gave compliments, and he felt giddy and strange to be on the receiving end of one of them. He tried to look for a hint of irony in Billy’s face, for his teasing smirk— His usual way, his bittersweet acknowledgment of his blindness. But Steve couldn’t find any teasing smile, any quirk of the brow that would tell him he was joking. Billy’s face was serious but open, his brow soft and unbent, his jaw loose and easy. He was staring forward blankly.

“I know I can’t see you,” Billy continued, his voice low, “but I know anyways.”

Steve swallowed, feeling his heart quicken, a pulse of warmth shoot through his veins. He felt like he had the first time someone who wasn’t his Mom or his aunt called him handsome. The word was clunky, old fashioned… Girls usually called him hot or called him cute. The first person to call him handsome and mean it had been Nancy, and he had glowed for an entire day afterward. It was more sincere somehow, a word born of familiarity rather than passing interest. He wanted Billy to know he looked good, but he would have never expected him to give a compliment in return. It was true he couldn’t see Steve to know if this was a good assessment or not, but the conviction he held that he looked handsome… It was almost better.

“Hey, um... I was going to ask you something,” Steve continued, his

hands still splayed across Billy's shoulders, his face close. He shifted from foot to foot, his mouth going dry.

"Yeah?" Billy asked, his voice quiet and low.

"Yeah," Steve whispered, swallowing, watching the way Billy's lips moved.

"Uh, I've been thinking—"

"That's dangerous," Billy murmured.

"—and I'm sort of confused. I've been wondering about—"

"Steve? Billy? Come on! You have to get going!"

Steve jumped away from Billy, his hands flinging off his shoulders as his Mom came bustling into his bedroom, holding a basket of corsages. As she chattered away, pinning their corsages, Steve tried to avoid looking at Billy. When he finally did, there was an odd sadness in his eyes.

Steve swallowed what he had begun to say.

It was stupid anyways.

Steve pulled into the parking lot of Hawkins High and it was just like he remembered, just the way he'd left it. The same potholes, the same awning that leaked, the same red gym doors. Girls in flashy dresses and guys in suits (some equally flashy) milled about the parking lot and in the main entrance, talking excitedly, girls taking their pictures together, guys surreptitiously passing flasks, wallflowers and geeks and jocks and princesses all stuffed into their Sunday best and trying to escape teary eyed Moms and Dads to find their friends. His car purred as he shifted down and parked, turning the engine off. Beside him, Billy had pulled out a smoke and was lighting it, wearing Steve's dark wayfarers. His Dad had bought him a new pair for his birthday after his had "accidentally" gone missing. They looked good on Billy. He pulled them off.

"Well, here we are!" he announced.

In the backseat, Nancy was looking over the crowd and grinning, happier than he'd seen her in a really long time. She was obviously over the moon to graduate, and the end of the year mania was rubbing off on her. In contrast, Robin looked like she wanted to melt into the seat and become a part of the leather. Her giant puffy dress took up most of the back, and her dark eyeliner gave her the distinct impression of looking like a ruffled and displeased swan. She looked like she regretted agreeing to go to prom, and was looking out across the parking lot at the crowds with trepidation. Billy seemed a little nervous too, though he was hiding it well. Steve knew it wasn't because prom made him nervous, but because he hadn't had to deal with a lot of crowds since he'd been injured, and some of the kids at this prom had been affected by the Mind Flayer similarly. He was nervous to talk to them, nervous to be asked about what had happened.

With any luck, he wouldn't have to.

The dinner had assigned seats, which he knew because he had been forced to listen to Carole bitch for months about the drama of seating arrangements at prom— So Harley couldn't sneak in then. Once the dance started, and people started to step out for cigarettes, however... That's when she was going to slip in as Billy went out for a smoke.

They all got out of the car and Robin took Billy by the arm like she was dragging him to his room for drawing on the walls, yanking him, her cheeks red. Billy turned and gave him a small smirk as he was dragged away toward the high school foyer where a group of teachers were checking people in. Steve snorted and shook his head.

"Oh my," Nancy said, laughing lightly. He offered his arm and she laced hers through it. They made their slow, leisurely way toward the building, looking around at everyone.

"You know, people are gonna think we're dating again, and that I'm a weirdo serial dater," Nancy stated, a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Hmm... Why do I get the feeling you don't give a shit?" Steve asked her, looking at her and grinning.

Nancy only laughed.

A few heads turned to look at them, girls he half recognized who had been jealous of Nancy and offended when she'd broken up with him. They looked equally pissed now, giving Nancy dirty looks that she returned with a grace and serenity born of the knowledge that she was getting the fuck out of Hawkins and that none of the trivial garbage that had been important in high school would ever be important again. Steve had felt the same way at his prom. As he'd looked across the gym, decorated in tinsel and streamers, he'd realized just how young they all had been, how young they still were. He realized that this was only a fraction of time, a time so short it was almost inconsequential. Nancy had long been ready to move on, and now that it was time, she was ready to blossom.

They went into the foyer and a teacher checked them through. They were given their table number, and when they looked across the seating arrangements, they saw Billy sitting alone at a table, looking a little distressed. Steve and Nancy joined him, sitting on either side of him.

"Uh, where's Robin?" Steve asked Billy as he sat down.

"She's uh... She went to the bathroom."

"Oh," Steve said. He had a funny feeling Robin actually hadn't needed to pee. He looked over at Nancy and she nodded, getting up and making her way towards the ladies' room.

"She's freaking out, isn't she?" Steve asked him, sighing.

"Yeah, pretty much. She went on this rant about how this is all... 'performer' —'performative?'— garbage, and that she was stupid to even go to a, and I quote, *'preppy party where the girls who made fun of you your whole life pretend to like you for a night.'"*

Steve winced. "Oof..."

"Yeah... Then she straight up burst into tears and ran away, so..." Billy sighed. "Jesus, you think we should tell her? She's fuckin' miserable..."

"Well... If she threatens to leave, we'll tell her. But Nancy went to go

save the day, and I think she'll be able to get her to calm down... She's pretty good at that."

"If she isn't already crawling outside through the windows in the bathroom..." Billy mumbled.

Robin sat on the edge of the toilet seat and listened to the sound of girls gossiping and shrieking and doing their makeup from behind the safety of the walls of her bathroom stall. Janice and Diane, two bombshells in her year, were fixing their hair as she came in. When she'd burst through the bathroom doors they'd turned and stared at her, her cheeks running with mascara, all the time she'd spent on her makeup completely wasted. She'd strode past them, covering her face, and locked herself in a stall, unable to stop herself from letting out a small sob. Outside, the girls had continued talking like nothing had happened. She sat for a few moments, feeling like a clown in her big dress, when she heard the door open and someone else come in. Robin wished they would just go away so she could at least get some quiet...

"Um... Did Robin Buckley come in here?" Nancy's voice asked. Robin cursed under her breath, wiping her face, the back of her hands stained black with her ruined makeup. A few moments later, Nancy's white pumps appeared at the bottom of the stall.

"Robin?" Nancy called softly. "Can you let me in?"

Robin debated not letting her in for a few vindictive moments before rolling her eyes and leaning forward, yanking the lock open. Nancy shimmied in around her puffy dress, closing the stall door behind her and locking it. Outside, Diane and Janice continued chatting loudly. Nancy gave her a small smile and reached out, putting a lock of hair behind her ear. Robin sniffed, rubbing her thumbs in her stained eyes.

"What's wrong, Robin?"

Robin swallowed, feeling a myriad of emotions she could barely express sitting like acid on her tongue. She was pissed off because prom was stupid, pissed off because she was graduating and she was

too poor to go to university right away, pissed off because she had been convinced by Steve's sincerity to get this stupid goddamn dress, and pissed off because she had to play pretend about who she was to a room full of strangers who didn't give a shit about her. She felt tears welling in her eyes. She had spent the last few months daydreaming about what dancing at prom with Harley would have been like, indulging in stupid romantic fantasies about how they'd look, how they'd move, how they'd kiss in the slow songs... She'd been so caught up in these little fantasies that she had forgotten what the real world was like, that the real world was a place where her love was strange, perverse, and not allowed. The closer prom got, the more pissed off and upset she got about it. She'd tried to ignore it, tried to just accept it, knowing that it wasn't going to do her any good to be mad… But then she'd walked into the gym, holding the arm of someone who wasn't the girl she loved, and something inside her had snapped.

She tried to speak but gave up, pulling her knees up to her chest, laying her arms across them and burying her head in the white tulle and sparkles of her dress. She couldn't even talk about how she was feeling with Nancy because they were in public, and talking about being a lesbian in a girl's bathroom was a one-way ticket to getting your ass kicked. She felt like she was going to explode or dissolve on the spot. She sobbed.

"Oh, Robin, shh," Nancy cooed, flinging her arms around her and rubbing her back. "It's okay... I know. I know. You don't have to explain."

After a few minutes Robin felt functional enough to finally lift her head. She knew that she had probably stained her dress with mascara, that her makeup was probably beyond help, and a bit of her dress had definitely been soaking in public school toilet water for a little while. The thought made her feel so pathetic she just wanted to go home.

"Nancy, can— Can you get Steve to take me home?" she asked, hiccuping.

"Oh, Robin, why don't you stay? Just stay?" Nancy urged. Robin couldn't fathom why anyone would try and convince her to stay

looking and feeling like this

“Nancy…”

A small knock on the stall door startled them both.

“Um... Are you okay Robin?” Diane asked. Robin blinked, taken out of her momentary misery by the sheer surprise of Diane asking after her.

“We’re okay,” Nancy assured, calling back.

“Okay... Was it Billy Hargrove who made you cry?” Diane asked, sounding a little concerned.

“Oh!” Robin laughed thickly in surprise. “Oh, God no. It’s... It’s something else.”

“Okay,” Diane replied. After a few moments, she spoke again.

“Me and Janice could like... Redo your makeup if you wanted...”

Robin blinked her puffy eyes in disbelief. Nancy looked from the bathroom stall door to her, giving her a small smile and raising her eyebrows. Diane sounded awkward but sincere. It didn’t sound like they were trying to make fun of her, just unsure of how to offer such a thing. Robin looked at Nancy questioningly.

“ *Say yes* ,” Nancy mouthed, smiling encouragingly.

“Um... Okay?” Robin agreed uncertainly.

Janice re-curled Robin’s hair as Nancy left them to go and tell the boys what had happened. Diane worked on fixing her makeup, sitting in front of her, kneeling on the bathroom floor as she dabbed foundation on her face and worked with a cotton pad to get rid of some of the mascara stains.

“So like, Billy Hargrove is your date?” Diane asked her, a little amazed as she dabbed the corner of Robin’s eye. Robin grinned, the clacking of the curling iron in her ear.

“Yeah,” Robin snorted.

“No offence, but... How the hell did that happen?” Janice asked, moving around to take another piece of Robin’s hair, clamping the iron around it.

“Uh, Steve Harrington, actually...”

“And how did *that* happen?” Diane snorted, her eyes widening, shaking her bottle of foundation. “Sorry, this foundation is a little bit darker than you, but it’s all I got.”

“It’s fine,” Robin said gratefully. She *was* genuinely grateful, if not a little confused as to why Diane and Janice were being so nice to her all of a sudden. It wasn’t that they had ever been mean to her, *per se* , but they had certainly made it known that they were not equals somehow. It seemed everyone had the get along fever as the days of their being forced to interact with one another were quickly winding down.

“Um... Steve worked with me at the mall over the summer. We became friends, and he also became friends with Billy this fall, so... We’re all friends now,” she explained. Diane nodded in interest, dabbing foundation on her face.

“Huh,” she said thoughtfully.

“He was always kinda standoffish, you know?” Janice said, pulling the iron from Robin’s hair and fluffing the ringlet it left behind.

“Who?”

“Billy Hargrove.”

“Yeah,” Robin said, shrugging a little. “He’s... He had a lot going on, you know.”

“I can imagine... California to Hawkins? Ugh. Gag me with a spoon...” Diane winced, gently spreading the foundation over her skin. “And then the mall thing? God! This town is fucked!”

Robin snorted. Diane had no idea.

“He’s a good guy, though,” Robin said, sniffing. “So is Steve. They’re good guys.”

“I wouldn’t have expected them to be friends with you,” Janice said thoughtfully, curling a lock of hair around the iron. She blanched and back-pedalled, raising a hand defensively. “I don’t mean that in a bad way!”

“No, I feel the same way,” Robin said, laughing a little. “If you told me this time last summer that Steve Harrington would be my best friend someday, I’d have asked to buy whatever it was you’re smoking.”

Diane and Janice laughed. Janice did a few more curls, fluffing them, and Diane pulled away, inspecting her face, looking for any traces that she’d had a small mental breakdown. A girl came into the bathroom, seeming stressed, and called out to them.

“Diane! Janice! Oh my God, there you are... They started dinner already, what are you doing?”

“Oh sorry,” Diane apologized, hastily gathering her makeup bag and zipping it shut. Janice yanked the cord out from the wall and wrapped it around the handle, throwing it into a bag.

“Bye,” Janice called cheerily to Robin, waving, following her friend out of the bathroom.

Diane put her small makeup bag under her arm and turned Robin to look in the mirror.

“There,” she said quietly. “That’s better.”

Robin inspected herself and found Diane was right. She did look better. There was barely any trace of a mental breakdown at all. Diane hovered by her shoulder, her satin pink lips twisting for a moment before she spoke up.

“Whatever it was that made you so upset... I hope it’ll be okay.”

Robin turned and looked at her, blinking. Diane looked hesitant but painfully sincere, more sincere than she had ever seen her since they

had all hit puberty. It reminded her that at one time they all used to play together, pretending to be horses and cats, running in circles, sharing crayons. At one time, they'd all got along.

"Thanks," Robin said softly, giving her a smile.

She meant it.

Steve spun Nancy around in crazy circles as Irene Cara belted out *Flashdance... What A Feeling.* She cackled with laughter, her face red, bouncing up and down as he yanked her around. He was grinning from ear to ear, drinking in the details of her face, her permed hair bouncing, her sweet collar bones, her pretty eyes. He let himself get lost in her beauty for a moment, so happy to be with her for just a little while, so happy to be happy with her for once.

The tempo of the music changed, and the lights dimmed. A slow dance.

Steve stilled slowly, holding Nancy's hands in front of him. They stood at the edge of the dance floor, unmoving as girls went looking for their boyfriends, as couples found one another, as people left the dance floor to take a break and sit down. At the edge of the floor they stood for many moments, just looking at one another. Steve swallowed. He didn't know what to say. This evening had been incredible, fun... Something he had needed from Nancy, one last time. He had the feeling she'd needed it too. It was time for them to part ways, to let go of the past. He found he was ready, happy that Nancy was going to live a life that would make her mother proud, happy that he had been there for a little bit of it. He was honoured to have come to know her. She gave him a genuine smile, a loving one, and stepped forward. She pecked him on the cheek and leaned back, tilting her head.

"Thanks, Steve," she said quietly. He smiled softly at her and nodded. Their hands fell to their sides, and Steve took a deep breath as she told him she was going to sit down for a while with some of her classmates and chat. He watched her go, feeling like he had finally healed a place where his heart had been hurting, like he could turn the page to a new chapter of his life. He turned and went to move

away from the dance floor. He looked into the crowd of swaying people and found Robin and Harley. They were embraced tightly, similar in height, their bodies close, the hem of Robin's dress sweeping across the gym floor. The love on their faces was so obvious, so beautiful, so overwhelming that he had to look away, tears springing to his eyes. He felt something strange and melancholy fly up into his chest. He thought he would feel pride to see them together, to see their joy, and he did... But there was a bittersweetness clutching his heart as he watched them, a sadness that he didn't understand but was familiar with. He supposed he didn't have someone like that, someone who was so obviously devoted to him, so in love with him that the whole room glowed when they were together... And he guessed maybe that's what he wanted, deep down. It was what was important to him, what he thought about when he drifted to sleep and the first thoughts on his mind when he opened his eyes in the morning. Around them, couples danced, suits and dresses mixing turbulently, hands drifting to where they shouldn't, blushing faces, young adults barely breaking free. Nobody noticed the two girls swaying to *Waiting For A Girl Like You* by Foreigner at their centre. Harley and Robin looked a million years ahead of everyone, a million miles away, a million times brighter.

He looked down at his shoes and sighed, smiling. He supposed he was a little jealous, too. He looked around and tried to find Nancy, finally locating her at a table with some classmates, chatting, laughing, taking pictures. She looked like she'd had the time of her life. Everyone was moving on, and leaving him behind. He was so happy for them, so proud of them... But he was sad, all the same. He shuffled over to their table, and picked up Robin's camera where it sat discarded. He figured she'd want a memory of her and Harley, one she wasn't expecting. He made his way over to the edge of the dance floor, waited for an opening... And took a picture. He smiled softly at them, and replaced it back on their table.

He had seen Robin and Harley laughing and leading Billy out to have a smoke while he and Nancy had been dancing, and he supposed it was high time he checked on him.

Steve needed a smoke, too.

He passed through the gym doors and out into the cool evening. The sun had set a while ago, the summer sky a deep blue tinged with gold. Stars were winking up above, constellations reaching across the navy blanket of the heavens. Someone had propped a door open with a rock, and the light from the gym spilled across the broken concrete, illuminating the few people milling about, mostly teachers and bachelors, the cherries of their cigarettes glowing orange in the night. Steve looked around, searching for Billy, and found him leaning against a concrete block on the far side of the parking lot, his back to the soccer field, his tuxedo jacket draped over the concrete beside him. He watched as his fingers brought a glowing orange cherry to his lips. He was outside of the halo of light cast by the gym, and the emptiness of the field behind him made it look like he was lying down in the night sky, lounging among the stars. Steve made his way over and joined him, leaning beside him on the concrete block.

“Hey, Billy,” he greeted, pulling out his smokes.

“Hey,” Billy greeted softly. His sunglasses were tucked into his dress shirt. He flicked his cigarette butt onto the ground and crushed it with his shoe. The night was warm, the smell of green grass and the newly unfurled leaves sweet on the gentle breeze. It was truly a beautiful night. The music from the gym echoed out across the parking lot, muted and distant. Steve slid a cigarette out of the pack, and put the box in the inside pocket of his tuxedo. He patted around for his light. Billy’s hand appeared, flicking his worn metal zippo, the flame jumping to life. Steve bent down toward it, his cigarette in his mouth, and lit the end, taking a deep and soothing drag. Billy took out another cigarette and lit it, flicking the zippo shut and shoving it in the pocket of his pants. Steve exhaled into the sky and looked over at Billy. His dirty blonde hair fluttered in the breeze, flickering over his shoulders. He looked peaceful, his face calm, his eyes half closed against the night.

“It worked out,” Steve said, smiling a little, gesturing with his cigarette. “Harley and everything.”

“Yeah,” Billy snorted, taking a drag and crossing his arm across his chest. “Almost didn’t though. I thought for sure Robin was gonna fuckin’ ditch...”

“Yeah... I dunno what was up with her,” Steve sighed. “I mean... I get being upset about Harley, but I dunno...”

Billy turned his head, his eyebrows furrowing slightly.

“Was more than that,” Billy mumbled quietly. His jaw worked a little as he smoked. “It’s... She was pissed ‘cause she has to pretend.”

Billy’s head tilted, looking at the ground.

“Pretend? What d’you— Oh.”

“Yeah,” Billy said, shrugging. “She’s sick of it. Being someone she isn’t... Y’know, to us, she’s just Robin. But to all these people, right? She’s just a weirdo. And if they knew who she really was, they’d... Well. I dunno.” Billy stopped talking, a dark look on his face.

Steve stared down at his father’s expensive leather shoes and felt strangely off-kilter and exposed, like Billy had knocked over something that had been keeping him upright. He felt like he understood exactly how Robin felt, and he had no idea why. He felt like there was something about him that was hidden, something that was obscured by years of being a dickhead with Tommy and drowning himself in cheap beer at parties and the skin of popular girls. He had always felt like something was different about him, and a part of it had finally begun to show after his fight with Jonathan. He thought he’d transformed into somebody he liked better, someone he could work on... But after New Year’s, as the winter passed and the spring blossomed into summer, he felt like there was something else. It itched at him like a flea on a dog, and he could never quite reach it to scratch. He took off his jacket and laid it across the concrete block beside Billy’s, fiddling with the buttons of his collar and his sleeves until he managed to rip the bow tie off, putting it in his pants pocket, his throat open. He rolled his sleeves and checked his watch, feeling antsy. It was a quarter past ten.

From inside the gym, the DJ had decided to continue the slow jams, and Lionel Ritchie’s voice crooned softly out toward them. The small group of bachelors that had been smoking by the door had wandered off, leaving the prom, out to begin a night of partying. The teachers had gone in. Steve could hear crickets singing in the ditch, distant car

engines, swaying leaves. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He was probably just acting crazy again. He usually felt crazy after he spent any time with Nancy, because she had a knack for looking deep and he was still learning how to dredge dark waters. He finished his cigarette and felt better, throwing it on the ground. Billy had long finished his, his arms folded over across his chest.

“Did you get to slow dance?” Steve asked him suddenly, like a firework had exploded up from his belly. He felt silly and strange, a grin on his face, his insecure train of thought derailing as something warm and tantalizing bubbled up inside.

“No, I didn’t get a slow dance,” Billy snorted, smirking. “What— You wanna dance with me, Harrington?”

Steve stood up and took Billy’s elbows, coaxing his arms open. Billy tilted his head back in surprise, a bemused smile on his face.

“What’re you doin’?” Billy asked.

“Dancing,” Steve said simply. He suddenly felt like he used to feel when he had been the king of his little world, bold and impish and delighted with everything that he wasn’t supposed to do. Dancing with Billy was something he knew deep down his Dad would frown at and Billy’s Dad would commit murder over, and the thought made him want to do it even more. Fuck Hawkins and its little rules, fuck high school and all of its little boxes. None of it fucking mattered. Steve felt giddy. He wasn’t a good dancer, but he’d try. He was desperately curious to see if Billy was a good dancer. He managed to finally coax Billy’s hands from him, taking them and leading him out onto the cracked pavement of the parking lot. The wind brought the promise of warm summer days as he laced his fingers through Billy’s, bringing their hands wide.

“Do you dance?” Steve asked him, grinning.

“Fuck no,” Billy grinned back. “Do you?”

“Fuck no,” Steve snorted.

Billy laughed, silly and genuine, his teeth sticking out a little over his

lip, his eyes crinkling. Steve felt himself grow weightless as he swayed their arms back and forth, both of them standing stock still like total dillweeds. Steve started swaying back and forth on his heels. Their dancing was off-kilter and off beat, but Steve thought Billy looked rather lovely in the twilight, starting to mimic Steve's movements and sway to the slow beat. Steve grinned and swooped in, putting his hand on the small of Billy's back, wrestling with his hand as he tried to do the same to him.

"Wh—"

"Oop!"

"Who's supposed to lead?" Steve asked him, laughing, doing a little tug of war with Billy for the privilege of leading them in their dance.

"Who's taller?" Billy asked, grinning.

"We're the same height," Steve laughed.

"Well, fuck, that's no good," Billy tutted teasingly. Eventually, Billy let Steve lead, slipping his hand onto Steve's upper back. Billy's hand was warm and sure against his spine. His hand at Billy's lower back felt comfortable and easy. To the side, their intertwined fingers led them, swaying as they danced. Steve turned his head from looking out across the parking lot and almost bumped heads with Billy. He stared into his face. Billy was smirking a little smirk, his eyes closed.

He looked bright.

He listened to the music and looked into Billy's face, enjoying it, feeling happy because Billy was happy.

" *I can see it in your eyes... I can see it in your smile* ," Steve sang along, grinning as Billy opened his eyes and laughed.

" *You're all I've ever wanted... And my arms are open wide* ," Billy sang quietly, still grinning. His voice wasn't half bad, if a low from being self-conscious.

" *Cause you know just what to say...* ," they both sang, swaying, smiling, not caring how they sounded, " *and you know just what to*

do... ”

Steve spun Billy, a terrible spin that made them both laugh. He grabbed back onto Billy, looking into his face.

“ *And I want to tell you so much...* ” he sang quietly. He trailed off. Billy was staring at him, his mouth parted, mesmerized.

“I love you....,” Lionel Ritchie sang, finishing the chorus for them as they lost their voices. They had stopped dancing.

“Steve... What were you gonna say to me before we left your house?” Billy asked him, his voice very quiet.

Steve felt his heart jolt.

“I—“

The gym doors flung open with a bang. Billy and Steve jumped apart in surprise. From the dim lights of the gym, a furious, unintelligible voice yelled across the parking lot as Robin and Harley came scampering out, Robin holding onto the voluminous skirts of her dress, Harley holding her hand. They were screeching with glee, cackling, running toward them. Behind them, Nancy squeezed out of the doors and ran after them, laughing, holding up her dress, her white heels in her hand, sprinting across the parking lot in stocking feet, Robin’s camera and her purse under her arm.

“What happened?” Billy asked, confused.

“It’s Robin and Harley... Hey!” Steve called out. “What happened?”

Robin and Harley came to a stop in front of them and looked at each other. They burst out laughing, hooking their arms together and bounded off across the soccer field, skipping and running in the summer night. Nancy was breathless with glee, watching them go. By the light of the bright moon, Steve gazed on in a heart-soaring joy as Harley and Robin twirled and fell into a deep kiss. They broke apart, still laughing, and Nancy ran after them. The three girls hooked hands and ran in a circle in the grass, howling at the moon.

When he looked sidelong at Billy, his face was turned toward their

hands, still intertwined.

“Never mind,” Billy said. “Don’t worry about it.”

Looking at their hands, Steve worried anyway.

14. "Don't Get Me Wrong" – Pretenders (1986)

June 26th, 1986

Steve, laying back in a lounge chair and holding a beer, grinned and watched from afar as Billy lifted Max into the air and threw her screaming into the pool. She popped out of the water, gasping, throwing her sopping hair over her shoulder.

“Billy!” she shrieked. She paddled over to the side of the pool as Billy found the edge and sat down, dipping his feet and calves in the water. Beside Steve, Dustin took a drink from a can of 7Up, leaned back in his lounger, and adjusted his new sunglasses. They were a gift Steve had given him for his birthday. Steve looked around to the patio door as Harley and Robin carried bags of chips in from the house and put them on the table. In the pool, Lucas and Mike bounced a beach ball back and forth and Will Byers floated nearby, hitting the ball back into the fray when it accidentally came his way. Eleven couldn’t swim— But she was trying, holding onto a floatie and dog paddling near Billy and Max. Steve smiled as Billy hopped down and slid into the pool, watching as he gently guided her, showing her how to hold the air in her lungs so she would float, and putting a gentle hand over her belly and back to help her balance.

“Thanks for letting me have my birthday here,” Dustin said, crossing his ankles and putting his pop can on a side table. Steve turned his head and nodded, shrugging. “No worries. It’s fucking hot as shit.”

The heat had risen in the last few days as the month of June wound down. From the looks of things, they had a brutal, humid summer ahead of them. He turned his head and looked at a far corner of the patio, under the awning of the house and saw Nancy and Jonathan sitting near one another, but not really speaking. He twisted his lips.

He’d thought Jonathan hadn’t come to Hawkins for Nancy’s prom because it was Hawkins— But then, today, two days after prom, he’d shown up looking sheepish and guilty with Will and Eleven in tow for Dustin’s birthday party. Steve tried to keep in mind that there was a lot of different and terrifying baggage involved in Jonathan’s life, but still... He couldn’t imagine how Nancy was feeling right now. He

knew she still loved Jonathan, and having him not show up for something important was probably make her feel pretty shitty right about now.

“Woo!”

He looked away from them and back at Billy, who was smoking and leaning against the side of the pool, his elbows draped on the edge. He was wearing a t-shirt, the disgusting novelty one that Robin had given him for Christmas, and sticking a leg up to support Eleven’s body with his calf. She was grinning, paddling loudly, finally starting to get the hang of it. Steve took his camera from the side table and closed one eye, looking through the viewfinder and zooming in. He took a picture, chuckling, and put it back down.

“He pretends to be so tough, you know?” Steve laughed, gesturing with his hand at Billy and polishing off his beer, putting the empty can on the ground beside him. He put his arms behind his head, settling back down into the cushions of the lounge chair.

“Yeah,” Dustin snorted, looking out across the pool.

He watched as Max pulled El’s hand so they were both floating on the surface of the water, Billy standing near. He chuckled as El closed her eyes and lifted slightly into the air, her blue swimsuit barely touching the surface of the water.

“Hey!” Max called out, swatting her playfully. “No using your powers!”

“Yeah, no cheatin,’ cheater!” Billy called to her, smirking.

El surreptitiously wiped her nose, grinning, and splashed loudly back down into the pool.

“How come El’s hanging out with Max so much?” Steve asked Dustin. “Aren’t Mike and El dating?”

“They are,” Dustin said, raising his eyebrows. “But, unlike me and Suzy, I dunno if they’re good at long distance relationships.”

“Ah,” Steve said, nodding.

Dustin leaned in, flicking down his sunglasses and peering at Steve over the top of the frames. “So,” he began conspiratorially. “Is the person you have a crush on here?”

Steve shook his head, rolling his eyes.

“Hey, Rob— Chuck me a beer?” he called to the table where Robin and Harley were chatting and eating chips. She reached into a cooler and grabbed him a Bud, throwing the can to him across the pool deck. He caught it deftly and cracked it, flicking the tab onto the side table.

“No,” Steve said, taking a long drink. “Because I don’t have a crush on anybody, remember?”

“I think you’re lying to me— Or, even worse, I think you’re lying to yourself,” Dustin said, shaking his head and taking a long swig of his 7Up like it was good whisky and he was a wise man giving out sage advice. Steve slammed his head back against the pillow of the chair and shook his head.

“Alright,” he said. “Whatever you wanna think. I’m pretty sure *I’m* the one who knows if I have a crush on somebody or not, Mister *Know Nothing* .”

“From your reaction, I’m gonna say your crush is here, whether or not you realize it,” Dustin deduced. “And I swear if it’s *Ancy-Nay* , I’m gonna kill you.”

“ Ancy-Nay ? What, what is that?” Steve said, staring at him, mystified.

“It’s pig Latin!” Dustin said, shaking his head. “Don’t you know pig Latin?”

“No, but I promise you it isn’t *Nay-cee* ,” Steve said, taking a sip of beer.

“That’s not how pig Latin works, but good,” Dustin said, crossing an arm over his chest. “You guys obviously aren’t compatible. But... What about Billy’s friend?”

Steve looked at Harley then back at Dustin, raising his eyebrows. Behind him at the snack table, Robin and Harley were standing very close and feeding each other chips, laughing, and blushing. He guessed he shouldn't be so surprised that someone younger like Dustin might miss the incredibly obvious hints that Robin and Harley were not in the market for boyfriends, but it still amazed him that he didn't realize it now while looking at the display currently unfolding behind them.

"No," Steve said flatly. "No, she's spoken for."

"Ugh, her *and* Robin? That sucks, dude. Those girls are totally your type."

"My type? Since when do *you* know my type?" Steve demanded, shaking his head and taking a long swig of beer. He watched Billy as he lifted Max and Eleven out of the water, taking turns throwing them in.

"Well, contrary to what you think you want in a person, like with Nancy, you actually like a rebel. You know, someone sarcastic and smart who keeps you humble... Someone who's kinda different and tough, but with a big heart? That's your type."

"You're just describing Robin and Harley again," Steve griped, adjusting himself in his chair as El went flying from Billy's arms into the pool, interrupting Lucas and Mike's volleyball game. He watched in amusement as Max climbed onto Lucas' shoulders and El climbed onto Mike's. They began a piggy back volley, the bright beach ball bouncing between the girls' fingertips. He watched as Will gazed on at the game from his floater. He was obviously content to be with his friends but he looked almost sad, like he was apart from them in a way that went beyond physical distance. Steve felt his gut go cold, the strange feeling of melancholy and distress that had struck him in the gym at prom looking at Harley and Robin winding up through his body as he watched Will's face. He was different somehow, Steve just knew, and in that moment he felt he might be different in the same sort of way even though he had no word to name it. Billy slid along the side of the pool, his cigarette hanging out of his mouth, and ended up bumping gently into Will. He watched as they exchanged a few words.

Then, Will rose into the air, water sloshing around him, his thin legs hanging around Billy's shoulders. Max, Lucas, El, and Mike whooped in joy, turning, and Steve smiled widely, his cheeks warm, as they started a three way volley.

Maybe Billy sensed Will was different too.

Beside him, Dustin took a sip of his 7Up and then stopped, his eyes going wide as saucers.

"Oh," he said. Steve followed his line of vision and saw Robin and Harley kissing deeply. He turned and gave Dustin a cheeky grin.

"Told you," he said, shrugging. "I'm not Robin's type."

July 1st, 1986

Billy was trembling like a leaf, lying in his bed alone. He thought about dancing with Steve, the sweet summer air... And swallowed down a feeling of sickness. Through the window, that same intoxicating breeze drifted through his bedroom and traveled under his door into the hall. He heard it as it whistled gently through the threadbare curtains, tickling his face. The room was humid and wet, a sheen of sweat beading on his forehead.

He was lying in his dishevelled sheets in a pair of worn jeans, his mother's pendant thrown to the side of his bare chest, the chain taught around his throat. He clawed at it, pulling it free, feeling like he was choking. His mouth parted and he let out a small sigh, trying to calm his writhing belly. He'd had a stupid fight with Steve. So stupid. He couldn't even remember what it was about. They'd been eating fries and then he'd felt like he was gonna fucking explode, like the world was crashing down, and he'd shouted, raged, threw the fries, roared… It hadn't been Steve's fault, but he'd been so angry he was sick, like his skin was burning, like he was made of fury and misery and nothing else. He gritted his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut, his hands rubbing the raised scars on his chest, rubbing, rubbing, rubbing them raw. He felt pathetic and ugly and wrong.

As the days grew longer and warmer, he felt *it* coming back, the

creeping things that lived deep in his brain that he kept at bay with sheer grit and determination. The winter had helped him feel like there was distance from what had happened to him, the frigid air and snow so different from that humid night in July… But now that they were thawing in the warm early summer, he felt the fear skittering in his veins, darkening his heart, quickening his pulse. Every time he closed his eyes he was terrified of opening them, wondering if he would see the Mind Flayer watching over him. He felt like he was fucking crazy, like he had lost his grip on reality... And still the summer crept ever closer. He kept the days straight in his head, embellished a little calendar in his mind's eye, ticked off the days as they slowly passed.

In two days, it would be the Fourth of July.

A Friday. The radio was calling for beautiful weather, sunny and bright, perfect for the display of fireworks the mayor had planned. There was going to be a fair. It was so eerily similar to the year before that Billy had to keep checking his arms, feeling them up and down, trying to determine if he could feel the bumpy flesh of the creature's influence crawling under his skin. The fact that he couldn't look in a mirror to see his blue eyes and unblemished flesh stare back ate at him like a wasting sickness. He was terrified to go to sleep, terrified to wake up... He dreaded the nights and suffered the days. He'd been able to hide it well— What had he been doing his whole life other than hiding what was bothering him?— but in the two weeks between the happy days of the girls' prom and graduation and the ever approaching beginning of July, it had been harder and harder to mask.

He'd become quiet and moody, something he knew he did when he was afraid, but he couldn't do anything to stop it. He felt like he had needles in his brain. He and Steve had gone for a drive on Saturday and he'd ruined it. Steve had called him an asshole, and he'd deserved it. He hadn't called in a few days, and he knew it was his fault— But Steve avoiding him felt like a knife twisting slowly in his gut, a self-fulfilling prophecy that he was broken and incapable of love.

Oh God ... He wrenched himself upward on the damp sheets and swung his legs around to the floor. He scrambled for a cigarette, his

hands knocking things over on his bedside table, but the pack he found there was empty. His back bent and he propped his elbows on his knees, bowing his head, his hands scraping through his hair. The skin on his abdomen felt strange, sliding and thick, and he felt a dry, choking sob tear through his throat. He'd been able to drive his Dad away, but he'd done it too late. He was a fucking asshole who couldn't act right to save his life, and all he did was hurt his friends and hurt his family... He had hurt Steve just because he needed to feel something, and hated himself for it. His stomach roiled like an angry sea and he clamped his teeth shut, trying to stem the tide, his eyes puffy. It was no use. He leapt from bed, tripping over laundry and other sundry objects, gagging, yanking open his bedroom door and clambering down the hall. He made it to the bathroom and it was blessedly open. He crawled across the counter towards the toilet and retched. He didn't know how long he puked. He lost himself in it, his quick breath making him feel faint, his mind focused on nothing but how he had failed the ones he loved. His eyes poured like an auger, drawing up the tears he tried to bury deep below. When he finally sat back on his haunches on the cold tile floor, slapping the flush handle, he realized he wasn't alone. Someone had opened the door. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, trying to calm his breath. Finally, he spoke.

"Hello?"

"It's Max," she said, very quietly.

"I'm okay. Go back to bed," he told her, his voice raw.

Instead, she came into the room, her footsteps soft on the tiles. He felt a rush of air as she knelt beside him.

"Are you sick?" she asked him.

Billy opened his mouth, the truth on his lips. He lied instead.

"Yeah," he said. "Just a bug, I'll be okay..."

"Is that... Why you were crying?" she asked him, her voice very small. She must have heard him in his bedroom.

He forgot sometimes that she was older now, and in a lot of ways, always had been. He felt sometimes like she acted up the sassy teenager bit for his sake, to give him a sense of normalcy, to make him feel like a normal big brother of a normal little sister. But neither of them were normal, and neither of them were so naive. The way she asked him made him sure she knew he wasn't telling the truth.

"I'll be okay," he croaked instead. It wasn't an answer, but it was better than lying again.

"Okay," Max said. Her voice was quiet and calm, and he wondered for the first time if she sometimes felt like he did, like the darkness seething in the Upside Down was choking her. He wouldn't be surprised if she did. She had been quieter since Neil had hit her, though she was obviously ecstatic he was gone. He added this to the endless list of grievances he had against his Dad. Before he had been forced to leave, he'd smothered another spark, almost vindictively. He hated himself and hated his Dad even more. He heard another set of footsteps coming near, rubber sliding on the wooden floor. The door creaked open.

"Are you guys okay?" Susan asked, her voice thick with sleep.

"Billy's just sick," Max said quickly. Billy swallowed and winced. They were so used to protecting themselves and each other that lying about what was really going on was second nature to them. Even at the worst their relationship had ever been, Billy hadn't told Neil she was hanging around with Lucas and had been vague about where he thought she was, because he knew if the truth came out she'd get hurt. He hadn't even consciously done it— It had always just been safer to lie and shield what was really going on than to get his Dad involved. He supposed in his own way he'd lied to protect her, but he wouldn't have ever claimed that it wasn't for selfish reasons.

"I'm… It's the Fourth of July in a few days, y'know?" Billy said, his throat raw. He shuffled back against the bathroom counter and leaned his head back against it, exhausted. He had no idea what time it was, but it seemed late.

"Oh," Susan said. There was a tense silence between them. He and Max had slowly allowed themselves to divulge small bits of their

feelings to one another, but Billy had never been this upfront with Susan in his life.

“Max, why don’t you go make us all some nice tea?” Susan asked her daughter gently, sounding more awake. Billy lifted his head, and he heard Max get up and leave, something gentle and whispered passing between them. Billy blinked and realized that, for the first time in his life, he was the only guy in the house. This made him feel strange and unstable, like he was realizing his Dad was gone for good all over again. He had never lived in a house where his Dad’s domineering eyes weren’t analyzing everything he did. His Dad was so paranoid that he’d been obsessed with making Billy feel like he should be tough and masculine at all times, and Billy had found himself falling easily for that garbage, if not only to protect himself. He knew it was all horse shit, deep down, but even in this quiet house where the only people to judge him for being weak were a fourteen year old girl and a tired middle aged woman he still felt like he was failing them by falling apart at the seams. His Dad had always lorded over them with the statement that he was the ‘man of the house’ and that his rules went. Now, ironically, he was the only man of this house— and what a lord he was, sitting on the bathroom floor, his stomach in knots from puking because he couldn’t get the demons in his head to shut the fuck up. At least his Dad wasn’t here to see him becoming something pathetic and small. Feeling this way was awful, but having his Dad see him like this would be worse. It wasn’t comfortable, but at least Susan and Max wouldn’t punish him for not being strong enough.

Billy heard Susan come into the bathroom, the swish of her robe as she gathered it around herself. Then he felt her shoulder rubbing against his as she sat down beside him.

“Billy...,” Susan began, hesitantly. He could tell she had no idea how to talk to him, or what to say. What could you say after what they had all gone through in the last five years? Where did you even begin? Billy had no idea, and he was sure Susan didn’t either.

“You and I were never close. There’s a lot of reasons that we never got close... I know you hated me...And I was afraid, and your father, well...”

Billy was frozen, his head hanging against his chest, his guts flipping. A tentative hand placed itself on his shoulder. He heard Susan swallowing, licking her lips.

“And you were just a little boy, and he hurt you so badly, and before I knew it you were a man, and I felt like there was nothing I could do, and...”

Her voice trembled, rage and shame welling in her throat as she spoke.

“Billy, I am so sorry,” she whispered. “I *failed* you. Over and over again, I failed you. I knew what your father was doing to you, and I was too afraid and too much of a— a *goddamn coward* to stop him...”

Billy felt her breath hitch. When she spoke again, her voice was thick with tears.

“I know that I didn’t protect you when I should have... But I promise you, that from now on, I will protect you... And I will take care of you... For the rest of my life. If you never get your sight back, I will take care of you. I will help you. I promise…”

Her voice became a whisper, a constricted sob. She put her arm around his shoulders, drawing his head against her own.

“God, Billy... Please forgive me...,” she choked. “Please, please, forgive me....”

Billy felt tears flick down his cheeks, his face unreadable. He felt simultaneously far away and very present, like he was piloting his body from afar and the emotions he was expressing weren’t his own. Was he ready to forgive Susan? She had winced and looked away so many times, pretended that he hadn’t been in anguish, that he wasn’t begging her to step in and put a stop to the violence.

... But she’d been afraid. She had Max to protect. If she let Neil hit him, maybe he wouldn’t hit her or her daughter... But her plan had backfired, and the fearful glances that Susan sent Neil’s way over the last five years told Billy that he wasn’t the only one living in terror. Maybe his father hadn’t hit her for a long time, or Max... But maybe

he had threatened to.

“He used to threaten you, didn’t he?” Billy asked her, his voice void of emotion. She cried harder.

“Oh, God, Billy... I am so sorry...”

That told him all he needed to know. He could just picture it— Neil cornering Susan, telling her that if she ever stepped in, told anybody about what he was doing, he’d turn on Max. Who knows what he had threatened to do to her— Billy didn’t even want to think about it. Billy closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It would have been easy to be angry, to push Susan away, to tell her that he would never forgive her for the fact that she’d never protected him when she should have. He could choose to hold that anger in his heart, resent her, revile her for her lack of bravery... But it wouldn’t change anything. Susan hadn’t been there for him when she should have been, true. But she was here *now*. She was telling him she was sorry. She wanted to do better, be better, be braver, and she wanted to do that for him. Steve’s face came back to him, that night that he had decided to kill himself and had run into him outside of the Hawkins Middle gymnasium. He’d apologized, and Steve had forgiven him. He’d told him, later, that he’d forgiven him even before he apologized. At the time, he couldn’t fathom how one person could be so gentle, but a thousand ways that Steve had been attentive and forgiving to him, even when he didn’t deserve it, came to him in a flood. Steve had never experienced the things that Billy had. He had never had to choose between violence and safety, never had to swallow his pride to survive, had never had to freeze in the wake of someone’s fury... But he had welcomed Billy into his life, risked his safety for him, forgiven him, and cared for him. He wasn’t afraid of the dark secrets Billy had tried to hide from him. Instead, Steve jumped in the fray, selflessly, with his whole heart. Billy longed to be selfless, longed to be able to understand a way of love not motivated by fear. He wondered, in this moment, what Steve would do, but he needn’t have wondered. For the first time, he knew.

He saw himself in Susan, a vibrant person beaten and frightened into a reserved one. Didn’t Susan deserve his forgiveness? She had pledged herself to him, to be what she should have been, for the rest of her life. His old insecurities told him she was not to be trusted, but

he had learned something about trust in the last year. He could trust Robin, Harley, Nancy, and Steve. He could trust Max. He didn't know if he could trust Susan just yet, but he found he was willing to try. As hard as it was, as complicated as his emotions were, he felt, for the first time in his entire life, that he could find it in his heart to forgive someone even if they didn't deserve it yet.

"You were just trying to survive and protect Max," he told her, pulling away and putting his hands on her shoulders. He couldn't see her, but he looked toward her. He had done his best. Susan had done her best. They had all just been trying to survive... And they *had* survived. Neil was gone, for good. He wasn't coming back. He, Max, and Susan were safe. They had made it, together.

"You were so brave," Susan said, sniffing. "You should have never needed to be brave, but you were. You were."

She gathered him in her arms, laying his head on her chest, holding him, stroking his hair. His body automatically went rigid, but he closed his eyes and breathed deeply. She wasn't his Mom. She'd never be his Mom… But she was familiar to him. She was comforting. Her worn robe against his nose smelled like it always had. He despised admitting it to himself, but he had long ago forgotten what his Mom smelled like, and her face was fuzzy to him when he tried to recall it on his own. Susan hadn't been there for him almost as long as his own Mom, but unlike her, Susan was here now. She was holding him. She was saying sorry.

He closed his eyes and let himself be comforted.

July 2nd, 1986

The phone rang and Steve moodily stared at it from where it sat on his bedside table. He had half a mind to pick it up and slam it back down in the cradle, if not just to get some peace. He had a funny feeling it was Billy and he wasn't sure if he wanted to talk to him yet. He knew the fight they'd had was stupid. It had begun over fucking fries and had exploded into Billy telling him he was an

ignorant bastard and him calling Billy a fucking asshole. He didn't understand— they'd been talking, making plans to go to the dumb fair the mayor was putting on for the Fourth of July...

The Fourth of July.

Of course. How could he be so stupid? The phone rang one last time and then went quiet. Steve leapt out of bed and stood over it, his hands on his hips, biting his lip. He was still unsure. Billy could have talked about how he wasn't feeling so hot about the upcoming date... He didn't need to bite his head off over it... And anyways, how did he know he was calling him to apologize? He could be calling to yell at him some more—

The phone rang again, startling him. He swallowed and watched it ring. It got to the third and final wring and he closed his eyes, grabbing the phone out of its cradle. He answered.

"Hullo?"

"... Steve?" Billy asked. He sounded quiet, even a little sheepish.

Steve's mouth parted and he forgot to answer for a few seconds. Billy continued, sounding uncomfortable and upset, but determined.

"I know it's you, so... I'm just gonna talk, and you can hang up whenever you want if you don't wanna hear it... I'm..."

Billy trailed off.

"Fuck," he swore, the sound of a lighter flickering on the other end of the line. For some reason Steve found this funny and let out a bark of laughter despite himself.

"Right?" Billy agreed, his voice a little muffled around his smoke. He sounded a little relieved that he'd heard him laugh. "I'm so fuckin'... I can't even fuckin' apologize right. Jesus Christ... Okay."

Steve stayed silent. Billy cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry, Steve. I— It's... In a couple days it's gonna be the Fourth of July, and— it doesn't actually mean anything, but it... I don't

know. I can't explain it, I feel... I feel like all the shit that happened is... Here, more than usual. If that makes any fuckin' sense..."

It did, but Steve wasn't satisfied quite yet. He sat down on his bed, holding the phone to his ear.

"Whatever... I just... Wasn't feelin' good and I took it out on you and you didn't deserve it. And I'm sorry."

Steve sighed, the tension in his gut unravelling like a rope. He let himself flop back onto his bed, lying down, rubbing his forehead.

"I forgive you," Steve said, licking his lips. He'd forgiven him yesterday, in his heart, but that didn't mean he hadn't still been a little miffed. There was no way he'd have been the first one to call back, even if he was ready to forgive.

"Thanks," Billy mumbled, clearly very grateful but also a little embarrassed.

A few quiet moments passed on the line between them.

"Do... You wanna go to George's Cafe?" Billy offered tentatively. "I'll pay..."

Steve smiled.

"Okay."

July 4th, 1986

It was a gloriously hot and sunny day.

Billy felt a tiny smile on his lips as the warm summer wind flew through the open window and tousled his hair. In the front seats were Robin and Steve, arguing lightly over the best place to park near the fairgrounds that wouldn't be totally overrun by cars or be too far away or in too sunny a spot. He half-listened to them, Nancy beside him in the backseat. He felt her nudge him, laughing softly at Steve and Robin's bickering. He turned his head to her and rolled his eyes to the ceiling, smirking. After much debate and re-parking, they

finally found a spot under the shade of a pine tree a couple minutes walk away from the flat football field near Hawkins High. Billy had been here once before, on New Year's Eve, with Steve, Nancy, and Robin. As he got out of Steve's car, his mind wandered a little back to that night, the cold air and snow... Steve's lips on his...

"So— What ride should we do first?" Steve asked him, winding his arm through his.

Billy stopped himself from jumping, Steve's voice startling him.

"Uh— I dunno," he shrugged, the question catching him off guard.

"Well, what's your favourite?" Robin asked him, her voice nearby.

"I don't really got a favourite," he said. "Never really went to these kinds of things back in L.A."

"What, really? But that's where Disneyland is!" Steve laughed.

"Yeah, like I could afford Disneyland," Billy snorted.

"Alright, since you won't tell us what your favourite ride is, we're doing mine first," Robin announced. "It's Tilt-A-Whirl time!"

As they drew closer to the grounds, the world became a sea of voices, loud bangs, discordant music... It made Billy's head spin, like he was floating above his body. He tried to put it out of his mind that the Mind Flayer was dead and gone, that time had passed, that the date in question had nothing to do with what had happened and didn't mean he was in any danger, but something hot and terrifying that made his heart pump faster in that usual sickening way was flooding through his chest and into his throat. He tried to zone back in on what Steve, Robin, and Nancy were saying, but he felt like his ears were buzzing, like the noises all around were melting together into incomprehensible sounds. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard, trying to calm down.

"Billy?" Steve asked him, walking a little slower. Billy's feet seemed to be moving on their own, his brain firing signals that he should still be moving despite the anxious buzzing.

“Yeah?” he forced himself to say, speaking like he was on a delay, like a speaker wire was loose and his voice was feedback.

“You look very handsome today,” Steve complimented him. Billy’s mind stopped buzzing immediately, as though Steve’s voice had wiped a foggy window and revealed clearly what was behind. Billy blinked several times, his stomach still churning, but too caught up in the fact that Steve had just called him handsome to give it any thought.

“Oh!” he heard himself exclaim, a little higher pitched and more sincere than he would usually be caught dead saying. He felt his cheeks flush a little and his voice dropped to a normal tone. “Thanks,” he said, nudging him, remembering to smirk because that’s what guy friends did when they were razzing each other, that’s what you did when you didn’t want your buddy to know you thought he was the best thing that had ever happened to you.

“Look,” Steve said, gently. “We all know what today means, and we’re all sorta... Well. I mean, Robin’s also feeling kinda nervous. Last year wasn’t mine or Nancy’s first rodeo, but it was hers, and it was yours too. So... It’s okay. Trust me. I get it. We all do.”

Billy nodded, his face forward, feeling like he was split down the middle between panicking and vomiting, or laughing and kissing Steve right in front of everyone in Hawkins.

“Tilt-A-Whirl time! Come on!” Robin yelled to them. Steve chuckled and hurried up, Billy following dutifully along. Unlike in the anonymity of bigger cities like Indianapolis, people in Hawkins knew vaguely what had happened to him. He thought that would make the staring better, but it almost made it worse. He knew that half the town had been hurt in some way, and he couldn’t help but feel like it was his fault. While people outside of Hawkins looked out of passing curiosity and then forgot, the townsfolk here looked at him and *remembered* . As he climbed up on the Tilt-A-Whirl platform with Steve, he had the realization that almost everyone in Hawkins was feeling the way he was feeling right now, at least to some degree. Thirty people was a lot of people to endure the horror of the Upside Down.

Too many people. And not all had escaped with their lives.

“Are you gonna be okay?” Steve asked him, quietly, in his ear.

Billy licked his lips and answered as best as he could. “I will be,” he said. He wasn’t sure if that was the truth, but he sure as hell wanted it to be.

“Haven’t been on one of these in a while,” Billy said as he was led onto the platform of the Tilt-A-Whirl, carefully stepping a foot out as he walked to make sure he didn’t trip. He tried to focus his mind on Steve, who seemed to be almost vibrating with excitement, practically dragging him in his enthusiasm. They located a seat and slid in, pulling the bar over their laps.

“Okay, we gotta make this thing go crazy fuckin’ fast, dude,” Steve said, drumming his hands on the safety bar.

“Oh, fuck yeah,” Billy agreed, feeling a small smile cracking onto his lips. In the domed seat of the ride, the noise of the fairgrounds was drowned out, a little less disorienting. Steve’s voice was easier to focus on.

“Robin and Nancy are in the one across from us so I can see the exact point when Nancy regrets doing this,” Steve chortled. “She’s okay for some rides, but this one? She‘ll screech like a banshee, you’ll hear her.”

The ride started and Steve immediately slammed against him, making them both slide to the right as the metal pod tilted. Billy gripped the bar across his knees with both hands, hauling himself along the right with Steve. They spun once slowly, then started to fling the other way. Billy rammed himself against Steve, following the trajectory of the ride. Shoulder to shoulder, Billy laid his head on Steve as they spun maniacally, a laugh bursting from his belly and fizzling away the remnants of anxiety gnawing at the edges of his nerves. He closed his eyes and yelled, Steve yelling and laughing with him. He melted into the movement of the ride, the little spinning world that was all their own. They spun so fast Billy’s guts flipped, his hair flying wildly into his face, colliding with Steve and Steve colliding with him as they spun back and forth.

From somewhere far away, he heard a very loud shriek echoing across the fairgrounds that could only be Nancy.

“I BELIEVE IN YOU, NANCY!” Steve yelled.

Billy traipsed along with Steve and Nancy at his sides, sharing a cigarette with Steve. They were heading for the snack and fair game booths in search of some cold drinks. The sun was past its zenith now, still humid and hot, but beginning to set behind the forest in the distance beyond the football field, casting some much needed shadows from the hazy sunlight. As they walked along, he heard Robin call out to someone and a familiar voice reply.

“Hey, guys,” Max greeted.

“What’re you guys up to?” Steve asked. Nancy extracted herself from his right.

“Lucas has been totally wasting all of our money trying to get a stupid prize at this rigged piece of shit,” Max said brightly, a sarcastic bite to her tone.

“Oh, come on, Lucas! Don’t waste your time!” Steve chided laughing, coming to a stop.

“I can do it!” Lucas protested determinedly. “just one more shot, come on Max!”

“Fine.”

“... I’m out of money, could I have a dollar?” Lucas asked. Billy couldn’t help but smirk to himself, knowing what was coming.

“What!” Max yelled, annoyed. “No! I’m not giving you anymore money.”

“But—“

“I’m going to get a hot dog,” Max informed him curtly, striding away, her sneakers swishing through the tamped down grass.

“Shit…” Lucas sighed.

“You tryna win her the big prize, there, Lucas?” Billy asked him after a few moments, taking the smoke from Steve and popping it in between his lips.

“Yes,” Lucas sighed, frustrated. “But I wanted it to be a surprise... I can’t win anyways, these stupid games are fucking rigged!”

“Yeah, you should probably keep your money, Lucas,” Nancy said consolingly.

“They’re not rigged,” a stranger’s voice said, irritated, presumably the man running the booth.

“What game is this rigged piece of shit?” Billy asked around his cigarette, nudging Steve to bring him closer to Lucas.

“Shooting. You know, little dart gun? Hit balloons?” said Lucas.

“Yeah,” Billy said. “I get you.”

“It’s a dollar to try again, young man!” the booth operator encouraged jovially.

“Here, I wanna try,” Billy smirked, nudging Lucas.

“But you’re blind,” Lucas said incredulously. “How’re you gonna win?”

“Just watch me,” Billy said, pulling out his wallet. He slapped a dollar on the counter in front of him.

He was good at these games. Really good. One good thing about being raised by a guy who was obsessed with looking manly was that he’d been forced to learn how to shoot, and had gotten very good at it while picturing his Dad’s face on beer bottles at a stone quarry an hour outside of the suburbs of Los Angeles. All he needed was a directing hand, and he was sure he could pop a few balloons. He heard the man running the both snort.

"Well, it’s the big bear if you can get six balloons in a row,” the man

said sarcastically. He heard the sound of his dollar sliding across the wood into the man's pocket.

"C'mere, Steve," Billy said, ignoring the man behind the booth and taking position in front of the dart rifle nailed on a pivot to the table.

"What's up?"

"I just need you to point me," he said, "and I'll shoot."

"Okay?" Steve said, sounding a little amused.

"How far apart are they?" Billy asked.

"About... Five inches?"

"Are they staggered or in proper rows?"

"Uh, rows. Ten across, ten down."

"Okay," Billy said, licking his lips. "Point me to the first one."

"You know, that's technically cheating," the man behind the booth chuckled.

"Shut up," Lucas snapped. Billy smirked.

Steve came over beside him, putting his arms around him and aimed the dart gun to the far left.

"Okay," he said uncertainly, stepping back. "I think that's about right..."

Billy put his finger on the trigger then fired.

Bang! Pop!

He smirked, sliding the gun to the right, counting. *Bang! Pop! Bang! Pop! Bang! Pop! Bang! Pop! Bang! Pop!* Six in a row. He straightened up, grinning wolfishly.

"What the hell!" Lucas exclaimed.

“Jesus Christ,” Steve muttered.

“I think you owe me somethin,’” Billy said, a shit eating grin spread wide across his face, taking the cigarette out of his mouth and exhaling smoke. He gestured with his free hand.

“Oh— uh. Yeah...,” the man behind the counter said, clearly amazed that he’d managed to do it. A few seconds later, Billy took the massive stuffed bear from the man. It was almost too big for him to wrap his arms around it completely.

“Pose! I’m gonna take a picture!” Robin called, laughing. Nancy and Steve sidled up next to him and he grinned big. He didn’t need this stupid thing but *man* , did it feel good to win it. Robin clicked a picture and Steve and Nancy stepped away.

“Oh my God, did you win that?” Max’s voice called out, amazed. She had clearly come back from her trip to the hot dog stand.

“He—“

“No,” Billy said loudly, cutting Steve off. “Lucas won it, we were just takin’ a stupid picture with it.”

He held it out.

“Holy shit, you did it!” Max yelled happily at Lucas, grabbing the bear from him.

“Uh, y-yeah!” Lucas said. “I won it, finally!”

“He’s sooo cute,” Max gushed.

“You can have him,” Lucas said. “You know, I uh... Won it for you.”

“Really?” Max said, almost in disbelief. “Wow... That’s... That’s nice of you...”

“Well— We should uh, go meet Dustin and Mike,” Lucas said.

“Oh yeah— Right,” Max said. She turned around. “Bye guys! Have fun.”

“You too,” Billy called back.

Steve leaned into his ear. “Lucas says thank you. And, by the way, that’s the nicest fuckin’ thing I’ve ever seen you do.”

Billy heard the pride and happiness in Steve’s voice and he flicked the ashes of his cigarette onto the grass under his feet, his head tilted down so he could hide the flush that crept onto his cheeks. God! When had he become so fucking sappy? He shrugged, embarrassed but happy to give Lucas something to give to Max. She deserved it. When Max and Lucas were finally out of earshot, Robin and Nancy pounced on him.

“ *BIG BROTHER BILLY* ,” Robin exclaimed, laughing, taking his face and rocking it back and forth. “You’re so sweet under all that gross cologne and cigarette ash.”

“Awwww...,” Nancy giggled as Robin stepped back, taking his right arm.

“Shut up,” Billy said, rolling his eyes. “It’s just ‘cause I got nobody to give it to.”

“Aw come on! How d’you know I didn’t want you to win *me* a bear?” Steve said, laughing and taking his left arm. They wandered away from the stall.

“I’ll win you one next year,” he said flippantly, inhaling heavily on his cigarette.

“Oh, promise?!” Steve demanded, sounding giddy. Billy knew Steve was just horsing around, but still… The idea of him doing something so cheesy and sappy for Steve had him feeling some kind of way and he tried to ignore the little flutter of surprise in his chest that flared when he promised him, under no uncertain terms, that he’d still be around in Hawkins next year. There were a lot of uncertainties hanging over his head, but he knew, in that moment, that he *would* be here next year, happily, with Max and Steve and all his friends.

“Yeah,” he said, nudging Steve. “I promise.”

The wind blew Billy's hair, the scent of the tall pines in the forests that surrounded Hawkins fresh on the summer breeze, reaching them above the smell of cotton candy and fries that permeated the ground below. The sun hadn't fully set, but it was dark enough that the fairgrounds had apparently switched the lights on.

"How high up are we?" Billy asked.

"Pretty high, not the highest, but he's still letting people on," Steve replied, sitting beside him. Billy stretched out, putting his arm behind him and leaning back, his legs dangling. Beside him, Steve seemed to be leaning forward.

"This is the first Fourth of July that I haven't been totally drunk in a long time— If you don't count last year," Billy said nonchalantly, smirking.

"I mean, me too— If you don't count last year," Steve snorted. The carriage rocked as he leaned back.

"Jeez," Steve sighed. "It feels like it's been forever but also like it was yesterday, you know?"

"Mm," Billy agreed, rubbing his chin absentmindedly with his hand. It was true.

The few days he had been under the thrall of the Mind Flayer were so dark and twisted in his mind that much of it was blocked out, a chunk of darkness like a redacted word in a wartime letter sitting where his memories should be. The days and months following were drowned in hazy recollections of pain and confusion. Only when he had been able to come home from the hospital did his sense of time and his memories begin to solidify again, become tangible things he could recall.

"I don't remember really anything from that day until about a week before you called me. Was on a lot of drugs and stuff," Billy said, shifting uncomfortably. He licked his lips, smiling a little, trying to make light of it. "Did anything cool happen?" he asked.

"No," Steve snorted. "I got a job at the Family Video with Robin,

Eleven and the Byers' moved away... That's pretty much it. Lots of sitting around and kinda waiting."

"Waiting?" Billy asked, quirking his brows.

"Yeah, y'know...," Steve mumbled. "Waiting for you."

"Me?" Billy demanded, incredulous. They had pretty much kept their distance in the year previous, and their relationship had never been friendly.

"Yeah. You," Steve chuckled softly. "Look— Just cause we weren't really friends didn't mean I wasn't worried... Max was really, really worried, but she was trying to be brave, you know? She came into the Family Video a lot on my shifts when you were in the hospital."

Billy blinked. He hadn't known that. Max tended to keep her suffering to herself, just like him. It was something you did when expressing yourself didn't garner positive and loving results. He knew she talked to Susan, and more since Neil had been driven from their lives, but... She couldn't talk to Susan about this, about him, and what had really happened. With Steve, she could, and he was his age, a brother figure, a person she could trust... Billy was struck with how much Steve had helped him and the people he loved just by being himself, by being silly, open, and kind.

"Thank you for taking care of Max," Billy said clearly, turning his head to Steve beside him on the Ferris wheel. He was truly grateful. He had never been a great big brother and was still learning how to be a better one. He was glad that Max had found someone to talk to, someone to trust.

"Hey— Don't worry about it. We're some of the only adults these kids have who they can talk to about this shit... And anyways, I've never had a sibling, and now I feel like I adopted a whole brood. It's kinda... Nice?" Steve laughed.

"Yeah," he said, more confidently. "You know what? I'm gonna be sappy. I was alone a lot as a kid, going on trips with my parents and having nobody to annoy... And I'm still alone in the house a lot 'cause they're so busy. Now I'm not alone, almost ever. It's nice."

“Yeah,” Billy croaked, swallowing.

He thought about the Woodstock keychain hanging on the key ring with his Mom’s snoopy charm and felt his heart beat faster. He knew that every moment he spent with Steve, his sister, Nancy, Robin, Harley was changing him, inexorably, like their affection caused an alchemical reaction in his soul, transforming something base inside him to reveal gold, the core of who he was and who he wanted to be. Billy knew, then and there, that Steve was his best friend, the person he wanted to be around for the rest of his life, the person he wanted to talk to, the person he always wanted near. It wasn’t that he didn’t feel fear or anger when he was with Steve. It wasn’t like Steve’s affection solved all his problems— In fact, sometimes Steve caused some of them. Billy himself was an idiot driven by his passions, and sometimes Steve was a brat. It was just that Steve was kind and good, and Billy wanted to be kind and good, and (if he dared believe it) he’d started to learn.

It was just that Steve believed in him.

For that, he would follow Steve to the ends of the earth in an effort to repay his kindness and his conviction that Billy could change and be good like he had done. He wanted to prove Steve right.

The Ferris wheel shuddered to life, swooping gently through the air, the warm evening summer breeze catching his hair and flickering it across his face. Billy moved his hand from where it rested behind Steve and put it down on the plastic seat between them. As his fingers descended, he touched Steve’s hand, resting in the same place. Startled, he pulled away.

“Sorry—“

Steve interrupted his apology, taking his hand in earnest, curling their fingers together, bringing their intertwined hands back down to rest on the seat. He didn’t say anything, but Billy didn’t mind.

Steve had said everything he needed to say.

July 6th, 1986

“Ooh, it’s letter day!” Max called happily, knocking on his door. Billy lifted his head at the sound of her pushing his bedroom door open. “Want me to read you El’s letter?”

“Sure,” Billy shrugged. Max sat beside him on the bed and shuffled some papers.

“Okay,” she began, clearing her throat. “ *Dear Billy. Max told me about your Dad. He reminds me of papa. Papa was a bad man. He kept me in the bad place. He made me hurt people. I did not want to hurt people.”* Max paused. “She’s talking about the lab, and the scientist who basically raised her… He made them call him ‘papa,’ it’s so creepy…”

“ *Your dad made you hurt people too,”* Max continued. *“Maybe he did not make you hurt people but you hurt people because you are hurt too. I hurt people because I hurt too. You don’t hurt people anymore. We don’t want to hurt people. We are better and we are happy.”*

Billy nodded slowly. Hearing that is brave girl had also hurt people somehow made him feel relieved. Sometimes he felt like he was trying to measure up to a scale that he’d never be able to reach, and hearing El’s assurances that she had made mistakes was comforting in a way he’d never be able to express.

“ *I am glad you had fun at prom. I did not know what prom is. Max said it is a big dance to party after a long time at school,”* Max read. “She probably means ‘celebrate.’”

“Uh… *Thank you for teaching me swimming. Papa made me go in water when I did not want to go in water. You help me feel safe in the water. Now I want to swimming a lot! I am glad that you got to dance and be with your friends. I am glad that your dad is gone so you and Max are safe. ”*

Max cleared her throat, flipping the page. “ *I am writing a lot better now. Joyce is helping me write better. I am doing lots of things and learning lots of things. I went to a zoo and I saw a lot of animals. There are so many animals I like them all. ”*

Max giggled. “She was so psyched to go to the zoo. It was all she talked about for like a week, about how cute all the animals were.”

Billy smirked, his eyes crinkling.

“ *I know now that papas don’t hurt. Bad men hurt. If your dad was your papa for real, he would not be a bad man and he would not hurt. He is* **not bitchin.** ”

Billy barked with laughter, and Max giggled. “That’s her way of saying that Neil is a fucking asshole, by the way,” she said. “She also underlined *‘not bitchin* ’ three times, so you know she’s serious.”

Max cleared her throat and continued. “ *I miss my friends in Hawkins. Say hello to Steve. Love, El.”*

“Her writing’s way better,” Billy complimented, stretching.

“Yeah, she can actually stay within two lines on a paper now. When she first sent me letters they were like, ten words on a page. You gonna write her back?” Max asked expectantly.

“Mhm,” he said, lying down on his bed. Max shuffled El’s letter to the floor and pulled out a notepad.

“Dear El,” he dictated. “Thanks for the advice about my Dad. You’re right. When we hurt we end up hurting other people, but it’s not right. I’m happy I’m not hurting other people. Life is better now without my Dad.”

Max scratched his words away on the paper, silent, as always, to the blunt and painfully truthful way he expressed his feelings to Eleven.

“I’m glad you like swimming. It’s one of my favourite things to do. I hope one day you’ll get to go to prom, too. You’ll have lots of fun.”

He thought for a moment.

“You’re right. My dad is *not bitchin* .’ He’s a fucking asshole. We’re better off without him.”

Max snorted.

“Your writing is way better. I’m proud of you. I’m sorry you miss your friends. That’s hard. I’ll make sure to say hi to Steve.”

He paused.

“Love, Billy.”

15. "Ophelia" – The Band (1975)

July 12th, 1986

It was finally, blessedly, hot outside– Really hot. Billy felt like he hadn't felt a good, hot day since the last week of June the year before. The sun was bright and warm on his face, the wind whistling through the open window. He smelled the air, leaning back in the passenger seat of the Camaro, his hand hanging out the window. Indiana smelled different than California. He was used to the city smog, the tang of salt, the hot sweetness of sand. In Hawkins, he could always smell the thick forests, the aroma of the larkspurs and violets on the roadsides, the thick foliage of the tall, looming maples and white pines, the loamy soil. He still wasn't used to being so close to so many trees, the farmlands and vast forests thick with damp and unfamiliar air. Steve was driving. He'd stuck a mixtape he'd made in the tape deck, and was half-humming and half-singing along to the Hollies, tapping the steering wheel with hands.

"She was a long cool woman in a black dress, just a five-nine, beautiful tall... With just one look I was a bad mess... 'cause that long, cool woman had it all..."

"Steve-o."

"Yeah?"

"How bad is she?"

"How bad is who?"

"The Camaro," Billy clarified, waving his hand, "what shape is she in?"

"Ehhhhh," Steve said, a small laugh in his voice, turning down the volume on the stereo. "Well... She's lookin' more like she's about to go to the dump than turn any heads."

"Ugh," Billy groaned, leaning his head back against the headrest. "What's the damage?"

“Well… There’s that nice bullet hole in the windshield from where Nancy shot you… Actually, the windshield is kinda fucked. I’m a little terrified to drive her ‘cause one of these days her windshield is just gonna shatter in on me.”

“What the fuck, man, why didn’t you say anything?”

“I dunno…,” Steve mumbled, sounding mildly embarrassed. “It just seemed kinda important to you, y’know? Taking your car?”

Billy turned his head. Even though he couldn’t see Steve, he felt the need to look in his direction, as if turning his face toward him would make his words seem more real somehow. He was both touched and amazed that Steve would willingly drive a car as fucked up as his apparently was just because he thought it might make him feel better. The gesture was so sweet and so fucking ballsy that Billy couldn’t help but grin, rubbing his lips to try and hide it. He’d always had a feeling that Steve was a lot braver than he let on, and a bit of a daredevil too. If the events of last summer hadn’t proved it, his sheer determination to become his friend and fight off his Dad certainly had.

“You’re the most sappy person I’ve ever met,” Billy chortled.

“What?” Steve whined, laughing. “What d’you mean?”

“It just seemed important to you,” Billy mocked, smiling. “I mean, yeah I guess… But, dude! If the car is that fucked, why the hell didn’t you bother sayin’ something? We coulda fuckin’ died or some shit… One little fender bender and bam!” — Billy slapped his hands together — “The car explodes and Billy and Steve are two smokin’ skeletons.”

“It actually did catch fire,” Steve informed him lightly.

“What?”

“Yeah, it totally caught fire.”

“And she still runs?” Billy cried out incredulously. “Jesus! She really does love me.”

He reached forward and patted the dashboard of the Camaro fondly.

“Nothin’ can get you down, huh, Adrian?”

“Adrian?” Steve echoed, snickering. “Really, man?”

“Yeah,” Billy said, smirking, fishing his pack of smokes out of the front of his denim shorts. “What, you don’t name your cars?”

“No,” Steve snorted. “And for the record, I may have a bunch of BMW’s in the garage, but none of them are mine. They’re all my Dad’s, he just lets me use them.”

“Oh, you’re breakin’ my heart, king Steve…,” Billy smiled around a cigarette. He flicked his zippo and lit it, putting the lighter in the console by the gearshift.

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve said. “I’m a no-good rich boy, we heard this one.”

“No,” Billy corrected, exhaling and flicking his cigarette against the open window. “You’re a *goody-good* rich boy.”

“What?!” Steve yelled, offended. “I’ll have you know that before you got to Hawkins I was *the* bad boy, alright? I was the guy getting all the guys and gals in trouble, the guy who had all the craziest parties…”

“And then I got here and you turned bitch,” Billy shrugged, grinning devilishly.

“Alright, if you wanna get technical, I turned bitch *before* you got here, so you were just filling a void left in the wake of me becoming a better person.”

“Ah,” Billy said, inhaling his smoke and smiling, leaning his head back against the headrest.

“Brag all you want about bein’ a bad boy, Hargrove, but I see right through you… You’re just a big sap,” Steve teased, swatting him on the chest.

“Uh, no way, amigo. You’re the sap,” Billy snorted.

“Me being a sap doesn’t make you *not* a sap,” Steve said in a sing-song voice. Billy felt a finger poking gently into his ribs and he startled, swatting Steve’s hand away. “Ya big softie.”

“There’s nothin’ soft about me, Harrington,” Billy smirked flicking his tongue over the top of his teeth.

“There *so is* , and it’s your big goddamn heart that you pretend isn’t there,” Steve chuckled.

Billy felt a flash of anger, but quickly tamped it down. What was Steve playing at, accusing him of being soft? He wasn’t fucking soft. He almost pitied Steve. Clearly he’d somehow convinced him he had a heart hanging around somewhere even after everything he’d gone through and everything he’d done – Or maybe it was something else… Maybe Steve just thought he was a sissy, a weakling…

“Hey, that was a compliment, dude,” Steve said seriously. “You’re taking it as a compliment, right?”

Billy shifted. Was it a compliment? If his Dad had told him he had a soft heart, it meant that he was being a wimp. But from Steve... What did that mean?

“I never been accused of havin’ a big heart before,” Billy said cautiously. He didn’t know how to tell Steve that sometimes he couldn’t tell the difference between a compliment and an insult. They’d often been the same thing in his house.

“Oh,” Steve said, trying to sound casual. “I guess there’s a first time for everything, right?”

“I guess,” Billy agreed. He supposed there was.

“Well...,” Steve continued, changing the subject. “Our poor girl *Adrian* also has dents in both her bumpers, and sometimes she sputters when she shifts, no doubt ‘cause she was literally on fire this time last summer... And you know what? I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s why she can barely shift gears, but I’d have to look. Might be an issue with the input shaft, that’s where the fire was. Something’s definitely fucked, that’s for sure…”

“I tried to get my Dad to help me with it before... Well… Before Susan kicked his ass and everything… I think he did tinker with her a bit but I dunno what he did under there... He pretends like he knows what he’s doin’ but he he’s got no fuckin’ clue.”

“Well, lucky for you, my Dad actually does know what he’s doing and he taught me,” Steve chuckled, patting the steering wheel loudly. “We’ll get this baby up and running and lookin’ cherry in no time.”

“And how the fuck am I gonna pay for that, huh?” Billy snorted derisively. Steve had a good heart, but sometimes he got ahead of himself when it came to bright and interesting ideas. “Let’s face it, I should just sell it...”

“I was thinking about that already,” Steve said. “My Dad knows a guy who knows a guy for pretty much any car part you could possibly need. He and his buddies have hobby cars – That’s where the Shelby Cobra came from.”

Billy smiled, remembering the air they got zooming around the outskirts of Hawkins. If he ever got his sight back he wanted to see that thing in person.

“There’s a guy named Daryl who has a boneyard outside of town, and I went looking one day,” Steve continued. “Found you bumpers, a new door... Same colour and everything. There was a Camaro exactly the same as yours sitting pretty in the main lot, I couldn’t believe it. Someone gutted her for a project and then must’ve given up and sold her. Body was in mint condition.”

Billy threw his cigarette out the window, licking his lips. He was overwhelmed by the words coming out of Steve’s mouth so casually, so simply, like picking up a few spare parts for the Camaro in his off time wasn’t one of the nicest things that anyone had ever done for him. He felt tears prick at his eyes and he looked down at his lap to hide them. He didn’t have a lot in the world, but he did have this car — And he’d be damned if he lost it too, just like he’d lost everything else. He had no idea if he’d ever see properly again to drive it. As of late he’d noticed strange bits of blotchy darkness that seemed to be a little lighter than the rest of the darkness... But he was probably just wishful thinking. He knew he couldn’t hold onto this car forever, but

he just wasn't ready to let go. He needed it, just a little bit longer. Beside him, Steve rambled on about car parts and little modifications they could do under the hood to really bring the Camaro up to scratch, completely oblivious to the way Billy surreptitiously wiped his eyes.

"And then we could maybe do a little detailing on the side, just for fun," finished Steve enthusiastically. There was a pause. "Um... Billy?"

"Oh— Yeah," Billy agreed, trying to keep how emotional he felt to himself.

"Is something wrong? Did I piss you off, or—"

"No, hell no!" Billy protested hastily. "No, I'm not mad, I'm just..."

His jaw twitched as he tried to find the words that he wanted to say. He slid a hand over and put it on top of Steve's, just like he had on the day he had taught him to drive stick. It was the only way he could figure out how to convey that he was genuinely touched. Gratitude, like a lot of happier emotions, were rocky paths for him to walk. He wasn't used to showing gratitude, but he desperately needed Steve to know what this gesture meant to him.

"I… Thanks," Billy said, patting Steve's hand on the gear shift. "Seriously, man, I just… Thanks."

"Hey," Steve said, his voice happy and kind. "No problem."

July 19th, 1986

Steve felt the door slipping from his grasp, and grunted.

"Jesus this thing is heavy!" he panted, adjusting his grip.

He and Billy were sweating and toiling under the mid-July sun outside of Steve's parent's place, taking advantage of Donnie Harrington's double detached garage and his lifelong car obsession's worth of tools and accessories. They had managed to do the bumpers of the Camaro, and had moved onto trying to re-attach a new

passenger side door... Which was turning out to be easier said than done.

“Okay, lift up your end just a little bit,” Steve instructed, and Billy did. “Okay! That’s perfect, now, ease it in— Alright, it’s on the hinges! Just hold tight, I’ll bolt it in.”

Steve grabbed the ratchet near his foot and went to work quickly to tighten the bolts. Beside him, Billy grunted as he tried to keep his end up.

“Okay! Let it down gently, let’s see...”

Billy slowly let go. The door was attached, not too low or too high.

“Phew,” Steve gasped, wiping away the sweat from his forehead and standing up. “Christ. What were they hiding in there, bricks?”

“Yeah, Camaros come with a nice stack of bricks to chuck at people,” Billy snorted, leaning against the side of the car and pulling out a smoke. He lit it and took a long drag. He was wearing blue cotton shorts and a worn out pair of sneakers, a loose tank top covering his chest. Steve knew he was self-conscious about the way his chest looked now, though he never said it aloud. Steve could tell in the way he pulled up his shirts to hide it, buttoned up all his buttons, or bothered wearing a shirt at all. Before, he had seemed most at home with as minimal clothes covering his body as possible. Steve ripped off his shirt, smiling, and threw it at Billy’s head. The t-shirt draped perfectly across his head like a sheet. Billy snorted and pulled it off his face, throwing it back at him.

“Now I better not feel any shorts on my face next,” Billy chuckled, the cigarette on his lips bouncing as he talked.

“No promises,” Steve smirked, stretching. They had managed to install a new windshield without much hassle and only a few minor scratches and arguments, the bumpers with ease, and the door with a lot of sweat and elbow grease. The last thing was to look under the hood and see where the crunching in the gears was coming from. He’d noticed it as of late whenever he drove it, and he wanted to make sure the gearshift wasn’t fucked by whatever Billy’s Dad had

done under the hood.

“I’m gonna go in and get a fuckin’ beer, I’m dying,” Steve said, patting Billy on his shoulder. “You want one?”

“Yeah,” Billy said, nodding.

Steve left him and went into the house, bounding into the kitchen and digging into the bottom of the fridge for a couple cans of beer. As he rummaged, his Mom came into the kitchen. He leaned back, looking at her as he cradled a couple cans of beer in his arms.

“Hey, Mom!” he greeted, a little surprised. She wasn’t supposed to be back until later that evening. His Dad was flying into Indianapolis from Boston and she’d gone to get him at the airport.

“Hi, dear,” his Mom trilled, coming over to kiss him on the head. He stood up and kicked the door shut with his foot.

“Is Dad’s plane late or something?” he asked curiously.

“Oh, no! Early actually, he’s just parking the car. I see you boys have been busy,” she said, going to put a few of her shopping bags on the small breakfast table by the window.

Steve blanched. He hadn’t exactly asked for permission to use his Dad’s tools while he was away... And now Billy was out there alone with him. Steve scampered down the stairs and out the front door, sprinting along the pavement to the detached garage. As he came up to it, he saw Billy leaning casually against the Camaro, his Dad parked alongside, leaning against his brand new 86 BMW.

Donnie turned his head, hearing Steve running toward them.

“Hey, sport,” he greeted jovially, lifting a hand in greeting. Steve slowed down. His Dad didn’t seem angry...

“Billy here was just telling me what you boys have been doing to this Camaro here,” he continued as Steve joined them.

Billy was standing with a hand on his belt, smoking, reminding him of the way he used to stand when he’d first gotten to Hawkins, his

chest open to the world, his chin uplifted in a cocky sort of way. Steve knew he was on the defensive. He couldn't think of anything that his Dad could say that would make Billy feel that way, but then again, maybe it was just dads in general that made him nervous. He couldn't exactly blame him.

"Right on," Steve said casually, handing Billy a beer.

"Do you mind if I take a look?" Donnie asked.

"Go ahead," Billy shrugged.

Steve stood listening and sipping his beer for the next five minutes as Billy gave his Dad the full rundown of what he'd done under the hood before his 'accident,' and what they wanted to do after. Steve was impressed by Billy's knowledge, and was kicking himself for not bringing up something they clearly had in common sooner. He'd just been too afraid to ask, in case Billy took it as a weird macho insult or something if it turned out he didn't actually know a lot about cars.

"Well, I'm impressed," Donnie said after a while, smiling. "You know your stuff. I'll let you boys get back to it. Steve, would you mind just parking the 86 in there when you're done?"

"Yup!" Steve said, catching the keys that were thrown his way.

"Good to finally meet you, Bill," his Dad said, clapping Billy on the shoulder. He turned to Steve.

"Oh, your grandpa Dickie is wondering when you're gonna come up, Steve. You should give him a call."

"Okay!"

Donnie Harrington set off toward the house, his hands in his pockets. Steve hadn't missed the way Billy winced when his Dad touched him, but he also didn't miss the way he seemed genuinely bolstered by the conversation, basking in the praise. Steve supposed that if you didn't get a whole lot of praise growing up you'd be pretty starved for it.

"He seems okay," Billy said, after a minute.

“Yeah, he’s alright. He was a good dad when I was a kid. I think I’m confusing him now though,” Steve shrugged. “He’s freaked I’m not following in his footsteps, you know?”

“Tch. At least he gives a shit,” Billy snorted, sipping his beer. “I’m pretty sure I was an accident my Dad’s been regretting ever since.”

“Why’d he even bother with Susan?” Steve asked. It wasn’t often Billy talked willingly about his dad, or his past. If he was in the mood to chat, Steve was in the mood to listen.

“I have no fuckin’ clue. Maybe he loved her, I dunno. He always treated Max real well, the five years we lived together. Was only in the last year after everything he started going for her... I think what happened to me sorta made him lose it...”

A lot of things about unpaid medical bills, Neil’s abuse of Susan, and the fear and loathing that had been living in the bones of Billy’s broken house went unsaid between them. Steve didn’t have to get Billy to say it— he understood. Things had been fucked up for so long, Billy seemed almost more tense sometimes, clearly terrified that his Dad would find him and cause some sort of retribution. So far, they hadn’t seen hide nor hair of him. He was keeping his distance. Steve thought that was the smartest thing Neil Hargrove had ever done, if the vicious glint in Susan’s eye as she held the shotgun was anything to go by.

“Well,” Steve sighed, reaching out and grasping his shoulder. “He’s gone now. Right?”

“Yeah,” Billy shrugged, wiping his mouth and crushing the beer can in his fist. He looked more confident than he sounded, but Steve knew it would just take time.

“Should we try and see what Adrian’s hiding under her beautiful blue skirt?” he asked Billy, nudging him, smiling.

“Yeah, alright,” Billy said, a small smile working onto his lips.

July 20th, 1986

Steve laid down on his bed, bringing his green phone onto the mattress with him, and plopped the receiver against his head, dialling a number. If he was calling his Grandpa Dickie, he was in it for the long haul. It rang quite a few times, as was usual, but then a gruff and winded voice finally answered on the other end of the line.

" *Lo'* ?" Grandpa Dickie called loudly.

"Hey, Grandpa! It's Steve," he greeted, smiling, crossing his ankles and putting his arm behind his head.

"Well, Jesus, Stevie, how the fuck are ya?"

"I'm okay," Steve laughed. "How are you?"

"I'm alrigh,' I'm alrigh,'— Just got done doin' up the wood, got some nice deal on a cort of wood from Dougie Parsons, you remember Dougie right? Well, s'no matter, he got a whole couple acres out his way and he done up some wood, gave me a good price on her..."

Steve listened, smiling, as his grandpa talked for the next five minutes about the cort of wood, the fishing in the lake beside his house, how Georgina Russell from down the way was going in for breast cancer treatment, and how his dog Shanna was getting old and lazy.

"And the fuckin' Jesus raccoons, Stevie, you'd never believe it... They're like a goddamn plague, always gettin' into my friggin' garbage cans and shit... Lord! When you come by this summer bring some fireworks or somethin' I wanna scare the fur off the goddamn bastards..."

"Sure, sure," Steve snorted, laughing. "Actually, Grandpa, I was wondering if I could bring a few friends with me when I come to visit?"
"Ah, I see... Ol' grandpa Dickie's too boring for young Steve... He needs some youngsters to keep him company..." Grandpa Dickie chortled.

"Oh, that's not it!" Steve laughed. "Actually— I have this friend, Billy, I think you'd like him. He reminds me a bit of you."

"Oh, so he's a saucy bastard, is he?"

“Yes,” Steve chuckled. “ *Definitely* a saucy bastard.”

Grandpa Dickie tittered in laughter. *“Yeh, alrigh’... Now who else?”*

“Well, my friend Robin, she’s sorta artsy, good with music—“

“Does she play anything?”

“Guitar, I think,” Steve shrugged. “I haven’t heard her, though.”

“Oh, good, I just got a nice guitar from Pete Harris, you know him? Nice fella. Traded him a few perch for it, he wasn’t usin’ it...”

“Yeah!” Steve said, smiling fondly, interrupting what was surely about to be a play-by-play about how his Grandpa had obtained a guitar. “I also wanna bring Nancy, remember her?”

“Oh, yes! You two still goin’ together?”

“Uh... No,” Steve said, rubbing his forehead.

“Alright, I won’t ask you no questions about it... You’re a crazy youngster for bringing around your old girl, but I still love ya...”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve grinned. “So that’s it— Just the four of us. D’you think that’d be okay?”

“Well, I certainly got the room and I certainly could use the friggin’ company!” Grandpa Dickie exclaimed happily. *“When are yas gonna come, d’you think?”*

“I was thinking this Saturday coming, maybe stay for about a week. You think that’d be okay for you?”

“I’m markin’ on my calendar right now, Stevie,” said Grandpa Dickie. *“Oh, and if you could grab a few cases of beer while you’re on your way in, I’d be mighty grateful...”*

“Already planning on it, Grandpa,” Steve assured. He licked his lips. “Uh, I should mention, Grandpa, my friend Billy was in an accident last year and because of that he’s blind right now. Just so you know.”

“Oh, frig, was it that thing that happened to you too, at that big mall?”

“Yeah,” Steve said. He wished, desperately, that he could tell his Grandpa everything. This was the first time something had happened to him that he hadn’t been able to talk to his Grandpa about. All he knew was that Steve had been in a freak accident at the Starcourt Mall, and had been one of the survivors.

“ *Jesus,* ” Grandpa Dickie tutted. *“Goddamn government, always fuckin’ it up.”*

Steve let out a bark of laughter. His Grandpa may not have known the details, but he definitely had hit the mark on who to blame.

“Don’t you worry about this Billy fella bein’ blind, Stevie,” his Grandpa assured him. *“Between his eyes and my bum leg, we’ll be a pair of saucy arseholes together.”*

Steve laughed. Grandpa Dickie had been in a car accident about fifteen years ago which had left him with limited use of his right leg. He’d retired two years afterward, and had been living in his big cabin by the massive Withrod Lake in rural Northern Indiana ever since. His wife Ruth, Steve’s grandmother, had died in the accident. Ever since, Steve tried to spend at least two weeks with him every summer. He knew he was lonely despite his choice to live so far from everyone, and he knew he missed his wife dearly.

“Alright— I’m gonna let you go,” Steve said. “I’ll give you a call before we head out, okay?”

“Alrigh,’ Steve, good, good. See ya soon!”

July 26th, 1986

Steve took a long drag from one of his Dad’s cigars and stuck his head out of the window of the Camaro as she growled down the highway. They were headed north, passing by fields of green and sparkling lakes that winked at them from distant shores. The sun shone on the car from above, hot and bright. Robin was in the driver’s seat, grinning from ear to ear, her eyes deranged. They were

going about ten miles over the speed limit, her hand and foot effortlessly shifting gears and weaving like a daredevil through the cars on the highway. She whooped in glee, gearing down, outstripping a shiny new Lincoln like it was standing still. Billy, who had moved to the middle of the backseat, clapped her on the shoulder.

“Hell yeah!” he bellowed loudly. Steve felt a grin split across his face, his wayfarers sitting on his nose as the wind from Robin’s lead foot on the gas pedal whipped his hair.

“I gotta say,” Steve shouted, turning his head back into the car, “I really did miss her.”

He patted the Camaro on the door affectionately.

“I missed her too,” Billy grinned. Beside Billy in the back, Nancy had her knees up against the back of the front passenger seat, her head down. She was doing a crossword puzzle, the speed at which they were driving concerning her very little.

“What’s another word for rusted?” she called out, tapping her ballpoint pen on her lip.

“Uh... Rot?” Billy shrugged.

“No, that’s organic... It’s gonna be something like... Metal.”

“Oh! Tarnish!” Robin yelled, flicking her eyes back to Nancy in the rear view mirror.

“Tarnish!” Nancy said, scribbling the word in the boxes.

“There’s a gas station coming up, I’m gonna get a snack,” Robin announced, turning the signal light on to turn off the highway.

“Yeah, I gotta piss like a fuckin’ racehorse,” Billy grunted, shifting in his seat.

Robin pulled into the gas station parking lot and stopped in a spot near the corner store, shifting down gears with a clunk and stretching her arms wide. She got out of the car and pressed her foot onto the

lever, pulling the seat forward to let Steve and Nancy out. As Steve clambered out of the back, Nancy and Robin linked arms and went into the store.

Steve shut the driver's side door and went around to Billy's side. He'd gotten out and was leaning against the side of the car, ruffling his hair. Steve joined him, taking another long drag of his cigar. They tasted like shit, and they smelled like shit, but there was something about stealing his Dad's bougie cigars that had always delighted him. He secretly *loved* to have things he wasn't supposed to have.

"Guess I should put this out considering all the fuckin' gasoline...," Steve chortled, bringing the end of the cigar to the bottom of his shoe and tamping it, putting it in a metal case in his pocket and shoving it inside.

"Seriously, man, I gotta take a leak," Billy told him, snorting, holding out his hand.

"Oh, yeah! Shit," Steve laughed, taking him by the hand and leading him inside. He located the men's room and steered him toward it. While Billy took a piss, Steve looked at himself in the mirror, annoyed to see a small zit forming near the end of his nose. All his high school career's worth of good skin, and now as an adult he got a little acne? How the fuck was *that* fair? Billy zipped up his pants, his belt jingling as he did it back up again, and Steve whistled to him.

"I'm not a fuckin' dog, you dickhead," Billy grumbled, a small smile on his face. He walked forward in the small bathroom and slid his hand along the wall, managing to find the sink easy enough. Steve moved out of the way, leaning against the wall, his arms crossed as Billy washed his hands.

"Where's the soap?"

"Left."

Billy flicked his hands against the sink, wiping his hands on his pants. Steve shuffled alongside him, linking their arms together, and they left the bathroom. Inside the corner store, there was only the bored looking clerk and an older man debating chocolate bar selections

over by the door. Nancy and Robin must have already left. Steve went to the fridge and grabbed a couple cans of Coke, piling them into Billy's free arm. Then he grabbed a case of Budweiser and went for the chips. He was craving Cheetos...

"What d'you want, Billy?" he asked.

"Cheetos."

"Man after my own heart," Steve chuckled, grabbing a couple bags and sliding them on top of the case of beer under his arm. They went over to the counter and plopped down their purchases. The guy behind the counter bobbed his head to the music playing over the speaker, wiping his long hair out of his eyes. He looked up at Steve and nodded in greeting.

"Hey, man," the guy said, rubbing the side of his nose and punching in the prices on the cash register.

"Hey," Steve replied, looking around the store to see if he wanted anything else. He looked back at the clerk and saw that he kept flicking his eyes up at Billy and then back down again. Steve furrowed his brows and a flash of anger sparked up in his gut. Was he staring at Billy because of his eyes? Why was he looking at Billy like that?

"Five seventy-seven," the clerk said. Steve blinked and fished in his pocket for his wallet and gave the clerk seven dollars. The guy behind the counter tucked his long dark hair behind his ear and flicked his dark eyes back up to Steve, a strange little smile on his face. He opened the cash register and got out Steve's change. When he handed Steve back the money, Steve watched as the guy's eyes flicked from his and over to Billy. Steve furrowed his brow, totally confused, pocketing the change and stuffing his wallet back in his jeans.

"Have a great day, guys," the clerk said, with that happy little smirk on his face that made Steve's cheeks go hot for reasons he couldn't explain. He grabbed their purchases, piling some into Billy's arms.

“Take it easy, man,” Billy called as they walked arm in arm toward the doors. Steve swallowed, totally thrown off. Sure, people stared at Billy’s eyes and scars, but they usually looked away when they were caught. This guy had almost seemed… Pleased when he looked at them. Lost in thought, he didn’t hear the old man by the door at first when he spoke up and said something to them.

“Wh-what?” Steve asked, blinking rapidly, looking at him. The old man sneered from the chocolate bar display, standing up straight and crossing his arms over his chest.

“I *said* … It’s not *right* ,” he repeated nastily, glaring.

“What?” Steve repeated, completely mystified.

“It’s not *right* ,” the man snarled, jabbing a finger at him.

“What in the fuck are you talking about?” Steve demanded.

“The two of you... Arm in arm like that... It’s wrong!”

Steve stared at him for a moment, his mouth agape, then turned to Billy. *His* expression was dark, his eyes glowering beneath his brows, his jaw set and tense. Then it dawned on him. This old man thought that he was holding Billy’s arm because he thought they were gay lovers or some shit. Steve squared his shoulders, a self-satisfied smirk cracking across his face.

“You’re right,” Steve said brightly, smiling. “It *is* disgusting… Leading my poor blind friend around like this. It’s not safe! He might fall!”

Steve untangled his arm from Billy’s and took his hand, lacing their fingers together. He held up their hands for the man to see.

“There!” Steve said, staring the man down with an impish grin. “Now he’s *much* safer!”

He walked away, hand in hand with Billy. As he turned back around to give the man one last stare, he could see the clerk looking after them with a wild, triumphant grin on his face. Beside him, Billy was howling with laughter, his head thrown back, his hair hanging down

behind his shoulder blades. Steve turned back around, looking toward the Camaro.

“Oh my God, did that creep say something to you guys too?” Robin demanded, running up to them, holding a can of Coke. “He asked me and Nancy if we needed, and I quote, *‘a rooster to take care of our hen party’* ... It was fucking disgusting.”

“Well, he did say somethin’, but it was just to tell us he thought we were the biggest goddamn faggots this side of America,” Billy snorted.

“I just chose to take what he said as valid criticism for how I was helping my friend,” Steve grinned. “The guy was right, I mean… Pulling Billy around like a toddler when holding his hand’s just so much safer, y’know?”

Robin sputtered and choked on her Coke, cackling. Over by the car, Nancy grinned in that proud way she did when she finally got what she wanted.

“He deserved that,” she smiled, arranging her light skirt and crossing her bare arms over her chest. “Fucking asshole...”

“Okay!” Robin said, wiping her face. “Alright, let’s put it to a vote. Does he get to live? Should we plough Adrian through the front of the store and kill him?”

“Hm,” Nancy said thoughtfully, a devilish smirk on her face.“D’you think they’ll buy we’re just helpless women drivers who don't know the difference between the pedals?”

Behind them, the man had come out of the store, red in the face, and was stalking back to his car. They all turned around and stared at him. He walked faster. Behind him, the store clerk had come near the window and Steve caught his eye from across the parking lot. He watched in amazement as he winked at them before turning around and going back to work. Something pleasant and terrifying fluttered up in his chest and he looked away, stuffing it down.

“Naw,” Steve said, turning back around to face the girls. “I think

from how red he was his pride is gonna take a while to recover. He can live... For now."

Billy felt a little useless as he leaned against the kitchen counter, smoking a cigarette and listening to Steve, Robin, and Nancy bring their things into the house. He knew nobody cared if he couldn't help, but he felt antsy, like he was doing something wrong by doing nothing while a flurry of activity raged around him. After a few minutes, he felt a presence beside him.

"How about we let them do what they're doin,' huh?" Steve's grandfather said, nudging him gently. "Let's go out onto the deck, wha?"

His voice was very kind.

"Oh— Uh. Okay," Billy said, clearing his throat. He tried his best to be polite, but the constant, nagging distrust of older adults flared uncomfortably in his gut. He'd never really been around old folks before, and he could be truthful enough with himself to admit that older men in general tended to put him on edge. He had his own father to thank for that little bit of neurosis... Even Steve's Dad, who was a calm guy without a violent bone in his body, made him nervous. He swallowed hard as Grandpa Dickie took him by the arm and led him across a room, and then out a sliding door. He was left alone for a moment as Grandpa Dickie closed the door behind them, silencing the hubbub of his friends bringing their belongings into the house. Grandpa Dickie led him to a deck chair and he sat down in it. The dog who had been sniffing around him in the house had followed them out onto the deck, nosing his knee curiously. Grandpa Dickie pressed something into his hand, and from the feel he could tell it was an ashtray.

Billy listened, on edge, as Steve's Grandpa settled himself in a chair to his left, sighing a little. A few moments passed and Billy smoked quietly. The breeze was nice here, carrying the fresh, lush air through the tall maples and pines and across the surface of the lake. He was always struck by just how much he could smell the forests and rich soil, how different it all smelled. After the city smog, he found the

fresh air overwhelming sometimes.

“That’s my dog Shanna, by the way,” Grandpa Dickie said. “She’s a nosy old girl... You just give her some lovin’ and she’ll be your best friend.”

Billy smiled before he could stop himself. He loved dogs. He reached a hand out for Shanna’s snuffling nose, finding the soft fur of her brow and stroking her head. He’d owned a dog back in L.A., the only creature that had never stopped being his friend no matter how much he changed.

“What kinda dog?” he asked.

“Oh, she’s a red and white collie mixed with neighbour’s dog. Nothin’ fancy, but... We get along. Don’t we, you lazy creature? Eh?”

Grandpa Dickie chuckled wheezily, giving the dog a solid pat on the back, then leaned back in his chair.

“So,” Grandpa Dickie began conversationally, “You’re Billy.”

“Yeah,” Billy said. He heard the sound of a cigarette pack opening and the flick of a lighter.

“Good, good,” Grandpa Dickie said. Despite his ingrained mistrust of older guys, Billy liked the way that Steve’s Grandpa talked. He had a gruff, wheezy sort of voice that was jovial and light, like he was going to dissolve into chuckles at any moment. Billy found himself cautiously relaxing despite himself. He couldn’t pinpoint what exactly, but there was something in the way Grandpa Dickie talked that reminded him of Steve. They didn’t sound similar, not by a long shot, but there was just something open and honest in the way they both spoke that seemed to be a family trait. He wasn’t surprised—Steve said he’d spent a lot of time here growing up.

“Steve said you were a saucy sort of bastard, s’that true?” Grandpa Dickie asked him, letting out a wheezy little laugh.

Billy’s eyebrows raised, a small smirk cracking onto his face. “I guess I could be considered somethin’ of a shithead,” Billy snorted.

He was a little confused as to why Steve had bothered to mention anything about him, but he guessed it was probably just to warn his Grandpa about the fact that he couldn't see. As for him being a 'saucy bastard,' well... He guessed he was. There wasn't really any arguing about that.

A few silent but companionable moments passed between them, and Shanna the dog finally decided she'd had enough head scratches and wanted more. He laughed as she climbed up into his lap, curling on him, putting her head on his shoulder. He'd never seen a dog do that before, and had a sneaking suspicion Grandpa Dickie spoiled her a lot more than his gruff words let on. Billy stroked her head, balancing the ashtray on the arm of the wooden deck chair, smoking and flicking his cigarette into it.

"It's hard, innit?" Grandpa Dickie said, after a while.

"What d'you mean?" Billy asked, confused.

"Not bein' able to do a lot," Grandpa Dickie clarified. He sighed. "Y'can't see it, but one of me legs is pretty bad. Was in an accident, fifteen years ago. Lost my wife... Can't do as much as I once could, and it takes me a long time to do the things I can do."

Billy blinked, taking his words in, crushing the lit end of his cigarette into the ashtray. He swallowed.

"I'm sorry," he said, unsure. He wasn't practiced at giving condolences the way Steve and Nancy and Robin were. He'd never really been taught.

"Oh, don't worry 'bout it, it's been a long time now. Still miss her, 'course, always will... but..."

Grandpa Dickie put a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry 'bout it, hey?" he said bracingly, his gruff voice gentle and kind. "S'alright. You can't do everything, can ya?"

"Yeah," Billy agreed, shrugging a little. Grandpa Dickie's hand slid from his shoulder.

“And you just call me Grandpa. Everyone does.”

“Alright,” Billy agreed, laughing softly. It was sort of... *Nice* to talk to someone who got it, at least just a little. They didn’t have the same struggles, but they both did know how it felt to have to learn to live their lives differently after their bodies were changed by something out of their control. He leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath.

“Thanks,” he said quietly. He smirked. “Grandpa.”

“No problem, shithead,” Grandpa Dickie wheezed lightly, chuckling.

Steve stood on the deck, leaning against the railing, and watched, smiling, as Billy played with Shanna the dog down below in the grassy lawn.

His Grandpa’s property was half an acre of land whose driveway wound through tall maples and pines that stretched above like a canopy. Eventually, the wooded area cleared to reveal a mid-size house covered in grey cedar shakes and a tin roof, with a large deck at the back of the house facing toward the lake. Below the deck, a lush green lawn grew out toward the small dock that floated by the rocky lakeshore. Beneath the canopy of trees reaching over the water was a firepit and a little ways further, a hammock. He shook his head, chuckling, as Shanna growled, her tail wagging, as Billy dashed and danced around her, tugging on a rope that she had in her mouth. He was barefoot, wearing a pair of cutoff denim shorts and a loose white t-shirt, his hair bouncing as he yanked and pulled on the rope. He finally got it from her and held it above his head.

“Come on, Shanna!” he called. She stared up at him, her tail wagging manically, her hindquarters swishing back and forth in anticipation.

“Goooo geddit!” Billy yelled, throwing the rope across the lawn. Shanna darted after it like a bat out of hell, leaping into the air and grabbing it, sprinting triumphantly back to Billy with the rope in her mouth.

Steve laughed, sipping his coffee. He’d never seen Billy so

unabashedly playful before. Usually there was alcohol involved for him to get this blissfully unconcerned with how he sounded or looked. He'd been dashing around in the evening sunshine with Shanna for the past ten minutes, almost tirelessly, grinning the whole time. He watched as Billy flopped lazily onto the ground, holding onto the rope, Shanna tugging on it. Beside him, Grandpa Dickie walked up to the railing of the deck and looked down into the grass, shaking his head and smiling wide.

"Well, Billy made a friend I think, hey?" he said, his eyes glinting.

"Yeah," Steve laughed. "Guess so."

He watched as Shanna began to tire of their game, flopping herself down beside Billy in the grass, lifting her legs so his hands could reach her belly. Steve picked up his can of beer and walked down the steps from the deck onto the grass.

"Hey," he called out to Billy, who lifted his head at the sound of his voice.

"Hey," Billy called back, a cigarette cheekily hiding above his ear, still smiling warmly to himself as he patted Shanna's belly. Steve sat down beside her, facing Billy, crossing his legs, and stroked her back. She closed her eyes, her paws up in the air, looking like she was in heaven. Steve looked out toward the lake and laughed as he watched Nancy splash around in the lake, goading Robin into the water. Robin hated any kind of bugs and creepy crawlies (hence why she loathed having to do anything farm-related while she was at home) and she had somehow convinced herself that this lake was full of leeches. Steve kept it to himself that there *were* a few hanging around— She didn't need to know that. He'd only had a leech on him once, after all.

"Get in, Robin, ya wimp!" Steve yelled.

"Fine!" she shrieked back, twitching in a disgusted sort of way before leaping into the water.

"Wooooo!" Billy yelled after her, laughing. Steve turned to Shanna, leaning into her snout and taking her ears, flopping them.

“I see that Billy likes you,” he said in a baby voice. “Huh, goosey-girl? Is Billy your friend?”

Her tail thumped against the grass and she panted happily, darting her face out and licking his face.

“Yes he is, mmm! Yes he is!” Steve said, making kissing noises at her.

“Yeah, we’re best friends. You’ve been replaced,” Billy said, smirking, taking the cigarette he had behind his ear and putting it into his mouth, digging in the pocket of his shorts for his zippo.

“You and I were best friends?” Steve asked him sarcastically, grinning. “That’s news to me…”

Billy rolled his eyes, lighting his cigarette, replacing the zippo back in his pocket.

“She’s a good girl,” Steve said, leaning back, shuffling his hand through Shanna’s fur.

“Yeah,” Billy said thoughtfully, one arm rubbing Shanna’s belly and the other holding the cigarette to his lips. “Did you ever have a dog or a cat or somethin’?”

“Dog, when I was a kid,” Steve shrugged. “He was mostly my Mom’s though. He was a white terrier, a little guy.”

“I had a dog, back in L.A.,” Billy shrugged.

Steve recognized this remark for what it was. Billy often couched things that bothered or hurt him in casual statements. Steve had come to realize that Billy was desperate to talk about the things that had happened to him, but didn’t know how to bring it up and didn’t know how to just ask if he could. He’d been discouraged from talking about how he felt for so long, the things he needed to talk about came bubbling up at odd times. Billy was inviting him to ask, if he wanted. Sometimes Steve didn’t ask. But sometimes he did. This time, he did.

“Yeah?” he prompted.

“Yeah,” Billy said, licking his lips. “He was kinda old, but I loved him, y’know?”

Steve was floored. Billy had never said he loved anything before.

“What was his name?” Steve asked.

“Oatie,” Billy said. “He was a black dog, really silver in the face near the end. Nothin’ special or anything, just a hound...”

Steve watched as Billy travelled home, to L.A., before his eyes.

“Dad told me and Max that we were gonna move to Indiana, and the day after I came home and Oatie was gone. My Dad gave him away, or put him down or somethin’... I dunno. He didn’t tell me he was gettin’ rid of him, he just was… Gone.”

Steve swallowed. He didn’t know what to say.

“Anyways,” Billy continued, shrugging. “Whatever. It’s done.”

Steve looked at him and watched as he absentmindedly pet Shanna. His fingers slid gently along her fur, his hand gentle. Shanna’s eyes were slowly closing, her body pressed against Billy’s lap, calm and happy. Steve let out a quiet sigh and laid down in the sunshine beside them.

July 28th, 1986

“S’gonna storm like a son of a bitch,” Grandpa Dickie said, leaning a hand above his head in the doorway that led out onto the porch, peering out across the lake. On the deck, Steve turned around, holding a coffee, and looked up into the sky. It was bright and sunny, a haze sitting far on the horizon. It was only ten o’clock in the morning, but it was already swelteringly hot. He wiped sweat from his brow and raised his eyebrows.

“You think?” he asked doubtfully.

“Yeh,” his Grandpa nodded. “See how the leaves’re all turnin’ over? And the crickets all gone quiet too?”

“Huh,” Steve said, looking out at the big maple tree that grew beside the water’s edge nearby, some of its leaves turned, swaying in the barely existent breeze. “Well, I see the leaves are turned, but they do that when it’s humid too...”

As for crickets, Steve hadn’t really noticed any to begin with.

“Just you wait,” Grandpa Dickie chuckled at him. “We’re gonna get a bruiser of a friggin’ storm tonight.”

“We’ll just have to see, I guess...”

Steve leaned his back against the railing and looked into the house, taking a sip of his coffee and smirking as Billy came wandering through the living room toward them.

“Oh, there he is, Mr. Lazybones!” Grandpa Dickie called jovially, turning in the doorway and greeting Billy as he sleepily yawned. He’d taken a nap on the couch after breakfast.

“Yeah, yeah,” Billy muttered. Steve brushed past his Grandpa and came into the house.

“You want another coffee, man?”

“Yeah…”

Steve busied himself with making coffee and his Grandpa went and sat out on the deck with Billy. As the percolator bubbled, he leaned on the counter and watched through the open door as Billy and his Grandpa talked. He was pleasantly surprised to see how comfortable Billy was, especially considering his discomfort with being around older guys. The percolator finished brewing and he poured black coffee into a large mug, taking it out onto the deck and sliding the door closed behind him. He handed it carefully to Billy, who immediately took a sip. Steve shook his head, smiling a little. Billy always drank a sip before it was cool enough, made a little hissing noise, then waited until it was cool enough. He’d never asked him why he did this, or if he even noticed that he did it, because he found it charming in a silly kind of way and didn’t want him to feel embarrassed about it and stop.

He looked out across the lawn and saw Robin swinging in the hammock near the lake, plucking on Grandpa Dickie's guitar. Nancy was sitting serenely on the dock near the small boat hitched to the wooden planks.

"You ever been fishing?" Steve asked Billy.

"No," Billy shrugged.

"You… Wanna go fishing?" Steve asked.

Billy lifted his head. "Uh… Okay."

Steve was lying back in the rowboat, his legs splayed over the side, a ball cap over his eyes, and a fishing rod halfheartedly folded into his hands. A small pile of beer cans had piled up beside him at the bow from the small cooler on the other side of him. The sun beat down on the lake, almost too hot to be bearable, but so welcome. They had rowed for a while and finally coasted into a hidden inlet on the west side of the massive lake. Steve cracked open a lazy eye and tilted his head to the right. Just past the cooler was Billy, whose bare feet were crossed and propped up on the side of the boat, his back lying flat on the bottom. His eyes were closed, his fishing rod held between his thighs, his arms bent and crossed behind his head. His aviators had slid down his nose a little, his bangs fluttering on his face.

He was fast asleep.

Steve yawned, noticing that his skin was taking on a red tinge, but not caring enough to put his shirt back on. He scratched his chin, his eyes following the line stretching from the end of his fishing rod, following the current.The boat was gently moving in a small circle, the unusually still water lapping quietly against the metal sides. Steve turned his head back to Billy and the cooler, putting his fishing rod in the crook of his elbow and opening the cooler lid, taking out a beer and closing it again. He held the cold beer in his hand and looked at Billy. A shit eating grin crawled onto his face and he held the beer out toward Billy's nearest nipple, shoving the ice cold can through

the armhole in his tank top and pressing it onto his flesh. Billy jerked awake, squawking, his hands flying out from behind his head in surprise. Steve cackled, pulling the tab on the can and flicking it into the bottom of the boat.

“Jesus Christ, Steve,” Billy grumbled, shuffling into a seating position, his fishing rod still clutched between his muscular thighs.

“Hee hee,” Steve wheezed, his hat still flopped over his eyes, grinning into his chest.

Billy opened the cooler and shuffled around in the ice. Steve half-laughed, half-squealed, knowing retaliation was coming. Billy grabbed a handful of ice and threw it at him. Ice cubes rained down on Steve and landed on his bare chest and on top of his shorts.

“Nooooo!” Steve laughed, brushing the ice off of him.

“S’what you get,” Billy sniffed, the boat rocking as he lay back down, a laugh tickling his voice.

“Hey,” Steve grinned. “I just thought I’d wake you up since the only thing you seemed to be catching was some Z’s.”

“Speak for yourself,” Billy snorted.

“Actually, my side of the boat is totally loaded with fish, you just can’t see them,” Steve teased.

“Ah, that’s why you fuckin’ stink,” Billy grinned into the sky, taking a drink of beer.

Steve reached over lazily and swatted him.

“I don’t stink, *you* stink,” he protested.

“No, you stink, asshole.”

“No, *you* fuckin’ stink, dude.”

“Naw, I’m pretty sure that’s you, Steve.”

“Hell no,” Steve said, shaking his head and grinning into the sky. “You’re the stinkiest man that ever lived. And I should know, I was friends with Tommy H. for like ten years.”

“Damn,” Billy snorted, his eyes squeezing shut in laughter. “That’s pretty rank. Guess you’re right. But— I’d rather be stinky than fuckin’ *smelly,* like you.”

“Wow,” Steve said, mock-offended. “Rude.”

“What can I say?” Billy sighed. “I’m a rude dude.”

“I am *so* offended,” Steve said, sitting up. “I’m telling all the fish that you hurt my feelings.”

He leaned forward, looking down into the water where his line bobbed listlessly.

“Hey, fish! Billy’s a dickhead!” he yelled at the water. “He doesn’t deserve you!”

Billy sat up too, crossing his legs and taking his fishing rod into his hand, gripping the edge of the boat and leaning his head down toward the water.

“Hey fish!” Billy yelled. “Fuck you!”

“See?!” Steve cried into the water, gesturing dramatically. “See what I mean?”

Billy chuckled, sitting back. He reeled his line in.

“I’m gonna re-cast, I dunno, I think that one was cursed,” he informed Steve.

“Yeah, good call,” Steve sighed, smiling, reeling his own line in. They both stood, the boat rocking.

“Alright,” Billy said, flinging his arm back, his hand on the reel lever. “Let’s see...”

He flung his arm forward and flicked the reel. The hook went flying.

“Okay, Steve, how far did it go?” Billy asked. Steve didn’t reply because he was frozen in place in terror, holding his fishing rod out and staring down at himself.

Snagged into the front of his blue swim trunks was Billy’s hook.

“Uh,” he warbled. “It uh... It didn’t go very far.”

“Oh,” Billy shrugged. He started to reel in his line.

“No, no, no, no, stop!” Steve cried.

“What?” Billy demanded. He stopped reeling.

“You’re hooked into the front of my fucking swim trunks!” Steve yelled, his voice a higher pitch than usual.

Billy’s head whipped around, looking in Steve’s direction.

“I’m *what now* ?” he asked, perversely delighted, a grin splitting across his face.

“Your hook got caught in my shorts,” Steve hissed, reaching a nervous hand down to the fabric, trying to unsnag the hook.

Billy dissolved into devilish cackles. “Oh, *well!* ” he bellowed, grinning. “Is it a *big catch* or a *little catch* ?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Steve said, laughing despite himself, still struggling with the hook. Suddenly he felt a very gentle pressure as the hook was pulled, and with it, his shorts. Steve’s head snapped up.

“Billy!” he yelled. Billy slowly reeled Steve in like a fish, and he was forced to stagger forward, the boat rocking.

“ *Seriously,* man?” Steve demanded, exasperated, his face betraying him by smiling. When Steve found himself directly beside him, Billy’s hand slid down the line to the front of Steve’s shorts. His face stared forward, smirking, as his hands deftly detached the hook from the fabric. As he did so, his fingers brushed up against the flesh beneath and Steve couldn’t help but let out a tiny, quiet gasp of surprise.

“What a catch...” Billy said, his voice low, his tongue flicking over his teeth.

Something electric shocked Steve to his core, and he quietly backed away without saying anything, his head buzzing wildly, so full of half-formed and confused thoughts that he forgot to retort. He cast his line out, watching it sail across the water and plop down some ways away. He flicked his eyes over to Billy, who was holding his fishing rod in his hands and gazing out sightlessly across the lake. His teeth worried at his thumbnail like a dog on a bone.

“Aren’t you gonna cast your line out?” Steve asked him, his voice light and teasing, trying to bring back the silly and easy feeling they’d shared before.

Billy’s hand dropped to his side and he let a little smirk on his face, one that wasn’t totally genuine.

“I’ll try not to hook you this time,” he snorted.

“Well, if you do, it was just meant to be,” Steve shrugged. He blinked and looked out across the lake, clearing his throat quietly. What the hell did *that* mean? The clever thing he’d meant to say had been warped on its way out of his mouth and turned into something a lot more significant than he had intended. Billy didn’t reply, but instead flung his line out in front, the opposite direction to Steve’s.

They settled back down into the boat, the sun beating down, the current bringing them in lazy circles. They quietly shared a few beers, a companionable but charged silence sitting in the hazy summer air between them. After a while, Steve felt a tug on his line.

“Finally!” he crowed, sitting up, reeling in his line.

“Oh, me too!” Billy called.

They reeled and reeled and fought the fish, trying to bring them in. Steve stood, putting in an almighty effort. Billy, trying to catch his fish, yanked his body to the side. Steve’s arm was wrenched, and he was dragged along the side of the boat.

“What?!” he yelled out in confusion.

Then, his line broke out of the water with a splash, clattering into the boat. Billy stood staring into the middle distance, confused, his line having gone slack. Steve stared down at the end of his line, panting.

He started to laugh.

The ends of their lines had managed to hook themselves together, tangled, until they had become a rat's nest of fishing line.

"What?" Billy asked.

Instead of explaining, Steve bent and put the mess of line into Billy's hand, who held it for a moment before realizing what it was.

"We caught each other," Billy said, bemused.

"We sure did," Steve laughed, holding his gut. "I guess it was meant to be."

Billy held the tangled lines in his hand, and the tiniest, most genuine little smile that Steve had ever seen broke out across his lips, making him glow brighter than the midsummer sun shining above their heads.

"I guess it was meant to be," Billy agreed.

His voice was so light and happy Steve felt like he might float away.

The sky in the northeast darkened to an angry, purplish grey as Billy and Steve steered the worn aluminum boat around the corner of the inlet later on that afternoon. The trees stood eerily still in the forest all around them, catching sudden violent gusts of wind which seemed to come from every direction, rocking the branches and then disappearing. The sun shone on them from where it had begun to dip in the west, its brilliance slowly being overtaken by the ominous incoming darkness.

"Huh," Steve said, looking into the sky as he rowed. "Grandpa was right..."

"About what?" Billy asked, leaning against the stern, drinking the last

of the beer.

“He said there’d be a storm today, and it’s lookin’ pretty dark up there.”

Billy lifted his head, his nostrils flaring slightly. “Seems kinda quiet.”

“Yeah, it—“

A distant grumble of thunder rolled over them from afar, echoing across the lake.

“Oh shit,” Billy snorted, leaning forward, a smirk on his face.

“Oh shit indeed,” Steve agreed, rowing a little more vigorously than he’d been before. There was no way in hell he was getting caught in a thunderstorm in the middle of a lake. After a few minutes they turned another corner and Grandpa Dickie’s dock came into view, the greying cedar shakes on the side of the house peeking through the green leaves. Another clap of thunder rolled across the sky, and Steve broke out into a sweat.

“Here,” Billy offered, moving forward and grabbing one of the oars. Together they rowed as quickly as they could, coming up alongside the dock. Steve hurriedly tied the boat in place and got out, grabbing the cooler and setting it on the wooden planks. He extended an arm down to Billy, who was standing in the rocking boat, and clasped his hand. As Billy stepped up and onto the dock, a droplet of rain splattered on Steve’s cheek, and he looked up. The sun was almost completely blotted out, the bruised sky roiling above.

Steve bent down and retrieved the fishing rods, tucking them under his arm, and gave Billy the cooler to carry. As he straightened up, the rain began proper, big fat drops pelting down from the heavens.

“Shit,” Steve laughed, grabbing Billy’s hand and reaching down to get the cooler. “Come on, let’s go!”

He sprinted across the dock, Billy just behind him, the rain soaking them to the bone. As they ran up the stairs to the deck, Nancy appeared at the sliding door and ushered them inside.

“Quick, get in!” she called, laughing.

Steve and Billy alighted on the front mat, shutting the door behind them. They were completely soaked from head to toe.

“Oh my God,” Robin chuckled, looking up at them from a book she was reading on the sofa. “I’ve never seen two more handsome drowned rats in my entire life.”

Billy gave her the finger, grinning. In his rocking chair by the fireplace, Grandpa Dickie chortled to himself.

“I’m assuming you didn’t catch anything?” Nancy snorted, taking the cooler from Billy and rattling it, the empty cans clinking inside.

“People don’t fish to catch fish, Nancy,” Grandpa Dickie scolded teasingly from his chair. “Defeats the purpose.”

“Ah,” Nancy smiled, putting the cooler on the counter, “I see.”

Steve wiped his sopping wet hair out of his eyes and walked over to the closet, his sandals squeaking. He put the fishing rods away, coming around to get Billy again, who had a pinkie in his ear and was flicking it, his head tilted to the side.

“Water in your ear?”

“Yeah.”

“Pretty sure you got sunburnt, Steve,” Nancy informed him, sitting down on the sofa beside Robin. Steve looked down at his arms and saw that she was right, his skin doing a decent imitation of cooked lobster. “Yeugh...,” he muttered, putting a hand on his arm and feeling the heat radiating off of it.

Billy reached out for him, his hand colliding a little with his elbow, and clasped his forearm, squeezing it.

“Oooh,” he gloated, grinning. “That’s a bad one...”

Steve rolled his eyes and took Billy into their bedroom, where they changed out of their soaking wet clothes and dried their hair. As they

emerged again into the living room, a massive clap of thunder cracked in the sky and the power flickered once and winked out.

“Whew!” Grandpa Dickie called sitting up from his chair. “Some storm, Wha?”

“Some storm,” Steve chuckled, going to the cupboard to find matches and candles.

“Well, who’s up for some cards?” Grandpa Dickie asked.

“G’night!” Steve called out to Nancy and Robin in the hall. He closed the door to his and Billy’s bedroom and went to sit down on his side of the bed, pulling his shirt over his head.

Billy sat on the other side of the bed, his back to Steve. Outside, wind and rain pelted the wooden shingles on the side of the house and hammered on the tin roof above their heads. The storm had settled over them, crashing with impressive fervour and shaking the house at its very foundations. Bright lightning flashed in the darkness outside of the window, the room exploding in almost supernatural light and fading just as quickly. It had been a long time since Steve had seen a thunderstorm like this.

Steve looked out the window. The world outside was pitch dark, save for the occasional flashes of lightning. Grandpa had given him an old fashioned oil lamp that he had been given as a wedding gift many moons ago, one of a set of four which sat in each bedroom of the house. It was turned down dim, the flames gently golden on the lightly stained wood panels and the scrubbed wooden floor. The linens on the bed were crisp and faded, the suggestion of small flowers patterning them like the subtle brush strokes of a water colour painting. Clipped into the side of the wide mirror above the dresser across the room was a drawing he’d done as a kid of he and his Grandpa fishing. He smiled at it. This had been his bedroom when he’d come to stay, and little bits of him were still scattered about the room, the remnants of stickers he’d pasted, books he’d left behind... All still there.

He turned, folding his knee, and looked over at Billy. He was

methodically taking off his shirt, pulling his arms slowly through the sleeves, lifting it almost reluctantly off of his head. He seemed to curl away from where he felt Steve sitting beside him, his spine turned, his shoulders folded inward, his hair hanging over his face like a curtain. Out of everything that had changed about Billy over the past year, this was the most obvious. Billy used to be obsessed with his looks, his chiseled chest and his biceps, and he used to try and show it off any chance he got. He'd loved watching girls watch him. Now... Now he hid. In the year since the Mind Flayer had got him, Steve had only seen his bare chest once. He knew Billy couldn't see what it looked like in the mirror or anything, but he could just picture Billy sliding his hands across the place where the creature had ripped his flesh, over and over, rubbing it raw. He could tell that it bothered him, that it ate at him in moments when he was forced to recken with the evidence of what he'd gone through.

Billy bent and grabbed a shirt from the floor. He motioned like he was going to put it on, then stopped, his hands resting in his lap, tangled in the material of the t-shirt.

"You starin' at me, Harrington?" Billy asked, his voice tiptoeing the line between teasing and frustrated.

"Not staring," Steve lied baldly. "Just observing. You know—For scientific purposes."

"And what do your observations tell you, mister scientist?"

"They tell me some hunky lifeguard from California is sitting on my bed," Steve said. "Truly, this'll be the scientific discovery of the century."

"Right," Billy snorted sarcastically.

A brilliant flash of lightning erupted across the room, followed by a magnificent crack of thunder. It began as a low, monstrous rumble that growled along the surface of the world and then tore across the heavens making the earth tremble. The house rattled as it groaned, the longest rumble they'd had yet. Steve let out a little laugh as it softened and went away, the pattering rain outside on the roof increasing tenfold.

“Whew,” Steve whistled. “That was a big one.”

He looked over at Billy and saw that he had barely moved.

“We never got thunder in California,” Billy said, turning his head slightly, one of his hands reaching up to tuck his hair behind his ear. “This shit is crazy...”

“The lightning is crazy too, tonight... I saw a couple bolts hitting over the lake earlier...”

Billy let out a little sigh, and turned himself around, crossing his legs and facing him. Steve blinked at Billy, and mimicked him, their knees almost touching.

“What’s up?” Steve asked.

Billy looked like everything inside of him wanted to shrug and say it was nothing. Steve could see the words on his lips, the easy shrug in his shoulders. His mouth parted for just a moment, and then he closed it again. He closed his eyes. When he finally opened them, his voice was quiet.

“You’re the only person I ever showed... *Y’know*. .. My chest,” Billy said, gesturing to his torso. His t-shirt was still sitting crumpled in his lap, his feet and legs bare, wearing a pair of dark jersey shorts. Steve flicked his eyes down to Billy’s torso, the Virgin Mary stamped onto the golden medallion winking back at him in the firelight. Beneath the shining oval was a roadmap of deep, pinkish scars— Some strange and zig-zagged, like they had been clawed, others straight and narrow, evidence of staples and stitches dotting their edges like the seam of a shirt. Steve had never asked Billy what surgeries and procedures he’d undergone; the truth was that he probably didn’t know. Max said he’d been almost comatose for two months. The spider-thin scars on his arms were almost completely faded now, little white things that stood out against his tan skin.

“I know it’s bad,” Billy continued. “I feel it. It’s... It’s a mess.”

“It’s not a mess,” Steve disagreed. “They did a really good job, actually. They cleaned a lot of the wounds up and stitched them

really well."

"Y'know, Steve... One time my Dad hit me, back in L.A., before we moved here, and it cut my eyebrow. Left a scar. Just a tiny little thing right here," Billy said, lifting a hand and tapping his forehead. Steve's eyes followed and saw there was a little scar there, greatly faded now, a little raised skin that interrupted the flecks of hair in his brow.

"And I used to stare at that thing in the mirror, and hate it, and think that my Dad had ruined my looks or somethin,' and hate him for that too... Isn't that stupid?" Billy said ironically, chuckling softly. "And now I got this... This *thing* on my chest, and all these little things on my arms..."

One hand fell into his lap and the other rubbed the back of his head. "I dunno," he mumbled.

Steve let out a soft laugh. "Yeah," he chuckled teasingly. "Your looks are ruined alright... Doesn't matter that you got these baby blue eyes, a mop of blonde curls, and washboard abs..."

Billy rolled his eyes, a small smile in the corner of his mouth. "Alright," he snorted.

" *More* than alright," Steve assured, patting him briskly on the knee.

Billy bent his head. His fingers picked at the t-shirt in his lap, his expression falling, something serious and difficult working in his jaw. Steve's hand lingered on Billy's knee, his fingers holding onto his skin like he could read his thoughts if he just held on tight enough.

"I know you're trying to make me feel better, but... Can you... Can you please tell me how bad it is?" Billy asked him eventually, his voice painfully low, painfully honest. Steve felt his heart dive into his belly, feeling honoured that Billy trusted him enough to ask but melancholic that he knew he needed to tell the truth.

The doctors *had* done a good job of patching him up and trying to minimize the damage to his skin. The scars were clean and well healed, the deeper ones pink and the more shallow ones white. Steve

didn't find them ugly at all, and anyone with a heart would simply know by looking that he had survived something horrific. But they *were* extensive. They bloomed from a tangle of deep pink scars over his heart and his solar plexus, thinner ones stretching down his abdomen and across his chest. The spider web of scars on his arms had once extended to his face and his hands, but it was almost like they had retreated slowly, like roots growing in reverse.

"Well," Steve began, licking his lips, "They're very noticeable, but they're healed really well. There's a lot of them. They're darker near your heart. The ones on your arms and legs are almost totally faded now, so it's honestly mostly just your chest. Will people stare when you're at the beach? Probably... But I also think that it looks like you had a big surgery and not like an inter-dimensional hell beast gnawed on your guts."

There— He'd said it. He swallowed, waiting for Billy's answer, still clutching onto his knee like it would give him answers. Billy's head was bent, his expression unreadable, his eyes shaded by his eyelashes. After a few moments, Steve lifted his hand, biting his lip, and reached for his chest. His fingertips grazed the deepest of the scars softly, over his heart, and Billy's head snapped up, his eyebrows furrowing, his lips parted. Steve looked into his face and pressed his palm against his uneven skin.

"Does it hurt?" he asked quietly.

"Sometimes," Billy replied, his shoulders rigid, his body frozen.

"Sorry," Steve said hastily, pulling his fingers away, his other hand sliding from Billy's knee. Before he could totally retreat, one of Billy's hands found his, reaching forward, his fingers grazing his forearm. He took Steve's hand, covering it with his palm, and placed it back over his heart. Steve licked his lips, finding them very dry. When he looked into Billy's face there wasn't an expression to be found, his face a still lake. But his *heart?* His heart was like a drum beat, a crazed tattoo against his rib cage, showing him all of the emotions that his face couldn't show.

"Thank you for telling me the truth," Billy said, holding Steve's hand that was holding onto his heart.

“Hey,” Steve said, his voice raspy. “Any time.”

Billy’s hand fell from his chest and Steve took his back. Outside, a flash of lightning lit the world and then plunged it into darkness. A thunder clap and a low rolling rumble echoed out through the room.

Billy took a deep breath and put his t-shirt on. They shuffled into bed, the oil lamp flickering. The droning rain on the tin roof above their heads lulled Steve into a calm, his muscles slowly relaxing into the pillow and the mattress, the storm blessedly breaking the humid air enough that he could curl down into the blankets without breaking into a sweat. He lay on his side, facing Billy, who was facing the ceiling, his eyes blinking tiredly.

“Go to sleep,” Steve muttered mildly against his pillow. “You always sit there and lie awake.”

Billy’s face turned toward him. “Maybe this is a stupid fuckin’ question, but... Do you like me? As... As a person, I mean?”

Steve lifted his head, bemused and a little sad. “Yes,” he reassured him. “I like you a lot... As a person.”

He watched as Billy swallowed down a bluffing, arrogant response, almost like he was fighting with himself to stay genuine, to stay in uncomfortable truth.

“I know I don’t say it as much as you probably deserve,” Billy mumbled, his face glowing red in the flickering light from the lamp on the dresser, “But… You’re a good friend, Steve. You been… You been really good to me.”

Billy’s voice was quiet, his words almost rehearsed, as though he had practiced countless times in his head before speaking these words out loud.

Steve smiled. “Of course,” he said lightly.

“I just got one question,” Billy asked.

“What’s up?”

“Why?”

Steve blinked. “What d’you mean, why?”

“Why? What about me... Makes you wanna be my friend?” Billy asked, his voice very quiet, almost like a whisper.

Steve had had the realization early on that Billy hadn’t had any friends in Hawkins before him, Nancy, and Robin— Not real ones anyways. The last real friend he’d had was Harley, and they’d had a falling out. Maybe Billy really thought he was unlovable, that he wasn’t someone anyone should be close with, be friends with... No matter how much Steve saw he desperately wanted to. Billy was trying to be tender when he didn’t know what it was like to be given tenderness, to be light and airy when everything in his life had been intense and full of pain. He was dipping his toes into unfamiliar waters, unfamiliar tides... And sometimes Steve got the impression that he was drowning, that he was doubting his ability to be a better person so badly that it was sinking him. Steve threw caution to the wind and found Billy’s hand under the blanket, grasping it firmly.

“Well...,” Steve began. “You’re funny as hell, first of all, I mean... You’re fun as hell to be around. You got a big heart under all that bullshit, and… I dunno…”

Steve looked into the ceiling. Billy was a lot of beautiful and interesting things that he didn’t have the vocabulary to name. All he knew was that when he was with Billy, everything didn’t seem so bad or so hard. He looked forward to the times when he was with him, and felt a sense of calm when they were together. Every mundane thing just seemed a little brighter when Billy was there.

“And I like bein’ around you. I just *like* you,” Steve said, laughing softly. “Do I really gotta have a reason?”

Yes was the word on Billy’s lips. Steve could see it on the verge of a whisper, wanting through habit and fear to doubt what Steve was saying. Steve was almost certain that fear would win this time, but to his joy and his surprise, he watched as Billy’s face cleared, his eyebrows relaxing. He smiled softly.

“Okay,” Billy said.

July 30th, 1986

The day was sticky and humid, sweat settling on his skin and going nowhere. Billy sipped slowly at a beer, lounging with Robin in a wide, oversized hammock stretched between two trees near the shore of the lake. It swayed lazily in the languid breeze that half-heartedly drifted through the maple leaves rustling above their heads. Robin was suckling on a bottle of wine and Billy’s beer had long ago gone warm, but he couldn’t be arsed to get out of the hammock and get another one. The water lapped quietly against the rocky shore, and a little ways away he could hear the distant sound of a crackling radio singing out a song he half-recognized but couldn’t fully make out.

He liked his friendship with Robin. Her knowing his secrets and him knowing hers felt good. It felt safe. He hadn’t known how hungry he was for touch until Robin had casually begun to lean on him, or hold his head in her lap, or embrace him, or play with his hair. She was affectionate, and he had come to learn (embarrassingly) that he thrived on touch— He craved it, even. His arm was going numb so he moved it, putting it behind Robin’s head like a pillow and closed his eyes.

“Hey Billy,” she said sleepily, her mouth barely making the syllables, the half-empty bottle of wine sloshing gently as she turned her head to look at him.

“Mm?” he hummed.

“If we both turn sixty and we’re alone and don’t have lovers, do you wanna get married?”

Billy’s eyes opened and he snorted loudly. “Uh, I dunno if you’d like the sex,” he snickered.

“Oh come on, we don’t have to have sex. Just— Married, you know? So we don’t gotta be alone.”

“Why me?” Billy asked, amused.

She shrugged against him. “Why not?”

Billy nodded, raising his eyebrows. He balanced his mostly empty beer can on his chest and held out his hand. They shook.

“Alright. It’s a deal,” Billy said.

“Good. But that means you have to actually live to be sixty years old, Billy,” Robin said, prodding him. “I’m counting on you.”

“Yeah yeah,” Billy yawned. “How come you’re thinkin’ about... All that?”

“I dunno,” Robin said. “I just wanna know that I’ll have someone if I ever end up on the verge of becoming a crazy cat lady.”

“Alright,” Billy laughed. He liked the way Robin thought. As he hadn’t exactly planned to live this long... Having a pact like this felt good. It felt solid.

He took a deep breath. He’d been trying not to think about the fact that Robin was going off to college very soon. She had been convinced that she wouldn’t be able to afford it, and that she’d have to wait a year, but luck had been in her favour. She’d done very well in high school, and the university of Indianapolis had offered her an entrance scholarship that was far more than she had been expecting. Not only that, but her Mom had stashed away some money that she hadn’t known about until she graduated. Billy was really proud of her. When he’d first seen her, without knowing her name, sitting by the tree in the quad near Hawkins High, he’d always been a little envious of how different and fun she’d seemed. He was happy to know that the impossible had happened and they had been able to become friends.

“Nancy’s goin’ to Indiana State too, right?” he asked.

“Yeah!” Robin said. “She got a scholarship too. Always knew that was gonna happen, though. I’m a good student, but I’ve got nothing on Nancy.”

“And the two cavemen’ll still be stuck back in Suckins,” Billy sighed dramatically, a little smirk on his face.

“Oh, come on. I’m gonna call you literally every weekend... And it’s not like Steve isn’t gonna wanna drive to Indianapolis all the time to see me,” Robin snorted, turning her head and putting her temple on his shoulder. “He can barely function without my input.”

“Nah,” Billy laughed softly. “You’re gonna make a ton of new friends that are way fuckin’ cooler than me and Steve.”

“Maybe, but those friends don’t know the shit that we do,” Robin laughed. “Do they?”

“That’s true,” Billy said. “Speaking of—Uh, did you end up tellin’ Harley about... All that shit that went down?”

“Yup,” Robin said, sighing. “And she thought I was joking. I didn’t know how to convince her, so I... Kinda took her to the Hawkins lab and broke in. Corpses of demodogs were just... Rotting right there in the foyer. She completely freaked.”

Billy turned his head to Robin in alarm. “Did she never wanna fuckin’ talk to us again?” he demanded.

“No,” Robin shrugged. “It took a couple hours but she accepted it. I mean... I just told her the truth, about everything, and... When I did, she actually decided to transfer to Indiana State.”

“Robin!” Billy laughed incredulously, nudging her. “What d’you mean?”

“Well— Maybe gnarly demodogs were only a *little bit* of the reason she decided to transfer...” Robin said gleefully, sounding giddy.

“Awww,” Billy crooned, grinning, moving his hand up from where it lay beside her and knuckling her head affectionately. “Someone’s in looooooove...”

“Maaaaybe,” Robin said, laughing lightly. “It’s my first year and it’s gonna be her second, so... She said she’d come here for a change of scenery and because I wanted to be closer to home. Maybe next year we’ll both go to UCLA, though.”

“You should,” Billy said bluntly. “You’ll see the weather there and

never fuckin' come back."

"Probably," Robin agreed, taking his hand and holding his wrist around her shoulders.

"It'll be nice to have Harley close again," Billy said slowly. It felt good to have her back in his life, even if they weren't as close as they used to be, even if she was in his life for someone else. She had always been a sweet person with a kind family, and Robin was lucky to have her love. Anyone would be lucky to have Harley's love.

"Mm," Robin agreed. She patted his hand. "Are you feelin' blue because I'm going away soon?"

"Naw," Billy said, shaking his head. "I'm rejoicing."

Robin laughed. "Well... At least you'll have Steve."

"Yeah," Billy snorted. "At least I'll have good ol' Steve..."

Robin grinned against his shoulder and Billy shook his head. She poked him in the chest.

"Oh, shut up…," he grumbled.

They had started the game with good intentions, but those good intentions had quickly dissolved in the copious amounts of beer and wine that Robin, Steve, Nancy, and Billy were drinking. Grandpa Dickie had long ago shuffled off to bed, Shanna the dog trailing behind him. As the clock on the wall chimed eleven at night, Steve slammed down a hotel on the board with such gusto that it sent the metal dog, car, and thimble clattering off the table, sending colourful paper money flying everywhere.

"HAH!" Steve shouted triumphantly.

"Steve!" Robin and Nancy yelled in unison.

"Did you wreck the fuckin' game?" Billy asked, shaking his head, holding a can of beer.

“No!” Steve protested. Before him was the wreckage of a game of Monopoly on the kitchen table, Robin and Nancy leaning back in their chairs, giving up. “I won!”

“No you didn’t!” Nancy protested.

The day had been almost unbearably humid, and they’d spent the majority of it floating in the lake to try and stave off the heat. As evening fell, they had retreated indoors in the hopes that it would be cooler, but the choking heat had followed them in. The ceiling fan above their heads spun and spun but did nothing to generate a cool breeze.

“Ugh, my balls are swimmin’,” Billy complained, finishing off his beer, his cheeks flushed. Steve himself felt like his skin was boiling, the damp air settling on him and going nowhere.

“Fuck it,” Robin said, getting up, the chair scraping back against the floor. “I’m going back in the lake.”

“Me too,” Nancy called, standing up.

They made their half-drunk wobbling way down the porch stairs and into the grass, heading toward the water. Robin ran ahead, and Steve snorted as she ripped off her shirt and tripped out of her shorts as she ran, leaving them behind in the grass. She turned to them in her underwear, reaching for the sky, and Nancy laughed from Billy’s other side.

“Wait, I’m gonna go get the camera,” Nancy said, turning tail and sprinting back into the house.

“Have either of you ever skinny dipped?” Robin asked, grinning impishly.

“I have,” Billy grinned. “Went surfing naked once. There’s a picture. I’ll show you sometime.”

“Oh my God,” Steve snorted.

“You, Steve?”

“Uh, no, actually... Which is kinda weird cause I have a pool in my backyard and I’m alone all the time at my house. You’d think, right? Perfect opportunity...”

“Well,” Robin said, yanking off her bra. “Now’s your chance!”

She threw her bra at Billy and it landed on his shoulder. He laughed, taking it and using it like a slingshot, flinging it at Steve, who dodged and karate chopped it.

Steve, emboldened by the beer and desperate to cool off, stripped down, throwing his shirt, shorts, and underwear down onto the grass.

“Oh, that’s better already!” Steve crowed, stretching.

“Goddamit, Steve! Why the fuck do you have a nicer ass than me?” Robin demanded.

“Cause I’m a good person,” Steve shrugged.

“Ch’yeah,” Robin snickered sarcastically. “That’s it, sure.”

Steve looked over and was pleasantly surprised to see that Billy had pulled off his shirt and was working at stripping down everything else. He was baring his scarred chest, looking only a touch uncomfortable as he did so. Steve supposed he was feeling the drinks and the heat too, but he also hoped that maybe he’d felt a little better about his appearance after their talk.

“Those are the three whitest asses I’ve ever seen in my entire fucking life!” Nancy called as she sprinted back toward them on the lawn, a camera in her hands.

Billy cackled, and Robin took his hand. Then she looked at Steve, grinning, and grabbed his.

“Let‘s go!” she yelled, tugging them.

They sprinted together, hand in hand, the heat of the night sweet and fresh, the lukewarm breeze a blessing against their naked bodies. Steve looked sideways as they ran, for just a moment, and saw two

happy faces grinning widely in joy under the summer moon. He looked forward as his feet hit the rocky decline into the lake. They crashed through the water, sending up a churning spray. All at once they were waist deep, and Robin and Billy let go of his hands. He dove under the surface, the water cool, slick, and wonderful against his skin. When he came back up for air, he saw Robin running back to shore, her pale skin visible against the darkness, outlined softly by the distant porch light that shone from the deck. Nancy was barefoot on the water's edge, pulling off her t-shirt over her head. Robin was egging her on, cheering.

Steve looked around and saw Billy floating in the water nearby, his eyes half-closed, submerged up to his nose. Steve paddled over to him, flipping over onto his back like an otter and floating freely, his hands behind his head.

"Hey," he greeted, yawning happily. The water felt heavenly. Billy lifted his mouth out of the water.

"Hey," he replied. He treaded water for a moment before he let himself slide onto his back, free-floating. Steve turned his face skyward and closed his eyes. His submerged ears listened to the world under the surface of the lake, the distant splashes as Nancy and Robin moved in the deep, the hollow sound of the currents moving smooth and snakelike through the dark. Then, he felt a hand touch his stomach and a dim splash. He lifted his head, pulling his ears out of the water, and saw that Billy had reached for him.

"I don't wanna float away," Billy said.

"Oh," Steve said, smiling. He moved his hands from behind his head and took Billy's hand in his. "There."

"Thanks."

They floated side by side, and Steve was so incredibly relaxed that he could have fallen asleep right there on the surface of the water. After a few minutes, someone tapped his foot and he looked up. Robin was standing over him, giving him a soft smile. She flicked her eyes down to his hand where it held Billy's and then looked him dead in the eye.

Something in the way she stared made his heart leap once, twice, three times. His mind tried to ask what she meant by these looks, but stopped dead in fear and confusion. If he didn't ask himself why he felt so calm and free when he was with Billy, he wouldn't have to answer. Nancy came treading toward them, and he fondly remembered her beauty as her lovely skin came closer, her long hair plastered to her face and onto her shoulders. Robin and Nancy looked radiant, and when he slowly floated himself upright, his bare feet touching the muddy lake floor, he looked down at Billy's floating body and saw that he was beautiful too.

As Billy stood up, his hand leaving his, he watched Billy's body move and bit his lip. He looked on as Billy and Robin started wrestling in the water, Nancy laughing and raising an arm to protect herself from the splashing water. He felt like he was watching them from afar, his mind jumping and hopping, thoughts that he'd never thought before bouncing recklessly in his head. He wondered what it would be like to touch Billy, to run his hand down his back, his chest... His thigh...

Steve sunk down into the lake, and tried to force his mind away from these uncomfortable and strange thoughts. They were wrong. He was just curious, is all.

He liked girls.

... Right?

August 1st, 1986

Robin plucked a guitar with gusto, strumming and singing loudly. Beside her, Grandpa Dickie hollered along to the song. Steve laughed, throwing another empty beer can into the open cooler beside the long log he was sitting on, wiping his face with the sleeve of his hoodie. It was late into the night. Crickets sang in the grass and the peeper frogs called out from the flickering green cattails along the shore. They were seated in a circle around a roaring fire that blazed merrily in a metal tire-ring. Behind Robin and Grandpa Dickie, the wooden dock floated serenely on the glassy surface of the water. The sky was unfathomably clear, the moon sparkling down on the lake, silvery and blue.

“WIIIISH THAT I WAS OOOON OLD ROCKY TOP, DOOOOWN IN THE TENNESEE HILLLLLSSS!” cried Robin and Grandpa Dickie.

“Hiiiiiiillls,” Billy sung low, goofily, into his beer.

Nancy, roasting a hotdog, giggled, her face bright red. Her hotdog was burning black to a crisp but she didn’t seem to either not notice or not care.

“AIIIIIN’T NO SMOOOOG-Y SMOKE ON ROCKY TOP, AIN’T NO TELEPHONE BILLS!”

“Ain’t no telephooooone bills!” Billy sang. Steve looked at him, laughing,

“SING IT BILLY!” Robin called.

“ONCE I HAD A GIIIIIRL ON ROCKY TOP, HALF BEAR, THE OTHER HALF CAT!” Billy hollered.

“WILD AS A MINK AND SWEEEET AS SODA POP, I STILL DREAM ABOUT THAT!” Steve yelled back.

He leapt up, grabbing Billy under the arm, and dragged him off the log and onto his feet. He hooked his arm into his and flung them into a circle, dancing a sloppy, drunk dosey-do.

“ROCKY TOP, YOU’LL ALWAYS BE— HOME SWEET HOME TO MEEEEE!” they bellowed into each other’s faces. *“GOOOD OL’ ROCKY TOP! ROCKY TOP TENNESSEE! ROCKY TOP TENNESSSEEEEEEEEE!”*

Steve cackled, and moved one way just as Billy went another. Tripping over themselves they tumbled to the ground in a heap. Nancy, Robin, and Grandpa Dickie roared in laughter as Steve tried to catch his breath, tears in his eyes. Billy, half on top of him, was wheezing. Every time Steve tried to sit up, he started laughing again. Eventually he gave up, letting his arms fall back above his head, giggling inanely to himself. Once Billy was finally able to move, he rolled onto his back, his hand still lying in the grass beside him.

“Hey Nance, chuck me a beer?” he asked. His tongue felt fuzzy and his head felt happy and warm. Robin had begun plucking a softer

tune, something he didn't recognize.

"Last one," Nancy said, throwing him the beer. He caught it, pulling off the tab.

"You want some?" he asked Billy.

"Yeah," he yawned.

Steve pulled off the tab, and the shaken can fizzed and spilled on his chest. "Oh shit!" he muttered, lifting his head and slurping it up. He took a drink and then carefully handed it to Billy's waiting hand. He took a few sips and then passed it back. Steve, tired of holding up his head, flopped back down onto the grass, holding the cold beer can on his belly.

"Well— It's gettin' to be late, I'm gonna head up to bed. Goodnight," Grandpa Dickie said, getting up and stretching.

"Goodnight, Grandpa," Steve called out, smiling, lifting a hand and waving.

"Night!"

"G'night!"

"Don't die in your sleep, old man," Billy called out, his eyes closed, grinning to himself.

"And don't you go burning' down my goddamn house with them friggin' cigarettes, shithead," Grandpa Dickie teased back, chuckling. Steve turned his head and watched as he made his slow, calm way back to the house and up the deck stairs into the house. Satisfied, he turned to Billy, half listening to Robin's quiet singing and the strumming of the guitar harmonizing with the night sounds. As he gazed into Billy's face, he heard Nancy gently poking the fire, the flames crackling softly. He felt the dew in the grass soaking into his shirt, cool and sweet smelling. Billy's face was half illuminated by the fire, the golden orange light laying softly on his skin, catching the blonde ends of his hair. His eyes were closed, his eyelashes laying on his cheeks, a little drunk smile on his lips.

Steve's mind drifted over all the things they had done together, and remembered the first time he'd seen Billy grin, for real. It had been something stupid, something he didn't even remember, but it had stuck out in his mind because it had been so genuine. Steve snorted softly, finishing off the beer, letting the can fall onto the grass.

"What's so funny?" Billy asked him lazily.

"You."

"Me? What the fuck did I do?"

"You're crazy," Steve laughed. "You know that, right? Just absolutely bonkers."

Billy's eyes crinkled, and he gave a grin that was goofy in all the ways that made Steve's stomach do a flip; his two front teeth extending ever so slightly over his bottom lip, the one distinguishing factor between his cocky smile and his silly, genuine one.

"Yeah," he agreed. "But you forced me to be your friend, so... Who's really bonkers, huh?"

"True," Steve snorted, grinning. "That's very, very true."

Billy felt the heat of the fire on his face, and the heat of the fire in his belly as he lay in the grass close to Steve, laughing and talking. He remembered a time when every conversation that they'd had was like a turning point in his mind, a novelty, a strange thing that he was convinced wouldn't happen again. As time went on and Steve persistently called him, took his arm, chatted aimlessly at him... Talking with Steve had become natural. He found himself speaking more softly, saying the things he had thought long into the nights but never dared say out loud.

And Steve listened. Not only did he listen, but he understood him, his thoughts, his theories, his observations, and thought he was interesting, thought he was smart. It had been a long time since anyone had thought he was interesting or smart, because he hadn't bothered to be interesting or smart. It had been one of the sacrifices

he'd made to survive his Dad's anger, his imagination and the deep thoughts he had late at night relegated into silence. With Steve... They seemed to flow from him as easily as breathing. In return, Billy was rewarded with the knowledge that Steve was more thoughtful than he let on, and sometimes he said things that stuck with Billy as he floated off to sleep, and lived on his heart when he woke up in the morning. They both knew they were two dumb assholes that were afraid to get too deep, but the more they talked, the more time they spent together, the less they were fearful of the endless dark.

The fire snapped and crackled, filling the happy and companionable silence that had fallen between them. Billy closed his eyes, pulling a wool blanket that Steve had retrieved from the house around his shoulders.

"Is it clear out?" he asked Steve.

"Yeah," Steve said, his voice quiet and happy. "It's really incredible, actually. You can see the Milky Way and shit."

"Damn," Billy said softly, a small smile on his face. He really desperately wished he could see it. The stars had been one of the only redeeming factors of being in a small town, and he'd only gotten to appreciate them for a short while. He heard Steve shuffle around and then felt his breath on the left side of his face.

"Here," Steve murmured, taking his hand. He took his fingers, making him point, and Billy closed his eyes, a happy smile on his face. He had no idea what Steve was doing, but he knew one thing: he trusted him. Implicitly.

Which for him, was a big fucking deal.

Steve took his hand and pointed somewhere to the left. "Along here," he said softly, speaking into Billy's ear, "Is the Milky Way..."

Steve guided his hand, and Billy imagined himself drawing a map of the night sky in his mind, the tip of his finger calling twinkling stars and the silvery wisps of the Milky Way into existence across a deep navy canvas.

“Over there is the Big Dipper... Or as us astronomers like to call it, Ursa Major...”

Steve drew the outline of a spoon, and Billy smiled wide, each point sparkling in his mind’s eye.

“Ohh,” he said. “Fancy...”

“We’re nothing but fancy here,” Steve assured, laughing. He took his hand and went somewhere else. “And here we have Cassiopeia... And Draco...”

He drew them, using Billy’s finger.

“And... Then over here we have a giant set of tits...”

Billy’s finger, held by Steve, drew giant circles in the sky, dotting them in the middle. Billy snorted, turning his head to Steve.

“And uh,” Steve giggled, moving Billy’s arm dramatically to the left. “Over here we got... Oh my God, is that you Major Tom?! Take your protein pill and put your helmet on, for God’s sake!”

Steve made Billy’s finger draw something that might have been a man or a spaceship.

“Wow,” Billy chortled. “Major Tom and Pair of Tits are my favourite constellations...It’s like I’m really looking at the night sky...”

Steve laughed, his face turned toward him, slowly lowering his hand back down onto the ground. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “That’s all the constellations I know...”

“S’more than I know,” Billy shrugged, his eyes open, his face turned toward Steve’s face.

They went very quiet, Steve obviously looking up into the sky, Billy left to the warmth of the fire and his thoughts. He noticed, very suddenly, that Steve had not removed his hand from where it clutched his own, strewn somewhat awkwardly over the top of his. He could hear Steve breathing steadily beside him. He felt his heart leap out of his chest and his eyes pop open as Steve carefully laced

their fingers together, the warmth of his palm like a boon against the chill of the night. His heart thumped in his chest, confusion and joy darting through his veins. His mind jumped back to the Ferris wheel, when their fingers had brushed, and Steve had laid his hand so sweetly, so softly, over his as they did something not so dissimilar to looking at the stars in the night sky. He thought about his fingers sitting over his heart, his hand holding him under the blankets.

In that moment, as though a freight train had hit him, he knew he was in love with Steve.

He'd known it before, but something about it had felt untrue. Now he knew it, as stark a fact as the Milky Way gleaming above their heads. He had never felt this comfortable, this happy, this calm in his life, and he felt this way when he was around Steve. It was as if his body and mind knew peace when he was with him. Steve made him feel like everything was going to be alright in the end. With Steve, he felt like he could face the uncertain future.

But he had no idea if Steve felt the same way. The question was on his lips, but he was petrified to ask it. What if Steve thought he was just being friendly? Billy was extremely unused to what real friends were like, having left behind affection and childhood sweetness with Harley when he had stopped being her friend in their early teens. Maybe this was Steve's way of showing him he cared. Maybe he thought he would be afraid in the middle of the woods, unused to camping or the sounds of the night. He licked his lips and desperately wished to speak, but he couldn't make his mouth move. Beside him, Steve had turned his head toward him. He felt his breath on the side of his face, slow and steady. Unable to handle the pressure, he put a smirk on his face and turned toward him, nose to nose.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothin'," Steve said quietly, turning his head away.

Billy turned his head toward the sky and closed his eyes. *Fuck* …, he thought to himself, misery and joy jumping in his heart.

Fuck.

16. "Wish You Were Here" – Pink Floyd (1975)

August 7th, 1986

“Alright,” Robin said, rubbing her hands together. “Where’s the girly mags?”

Billy, sitting cross legged on his bed, snorted as he folded some laundry in front of him. It was a Thursday afternoon, overcast and humid. Robin had showed up out of the blue on his doorstep with a six pack of Budweiser and a few joints. Steve was at work, and Nancy was in Indianapolis with her Mom getting the tour of the campus she’d be living in for the next semester.

“I’ll give you three guesses,” he said, tapping his cigarette into the ashtray by his knees.

“Hm,” Robin hummed, pretending like she wouldn’t know. “Is it... Under your bed?”

“Nope.”

“Darn! Is it... Under your pillow?”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Hmm... Are they...”

She wrenched open the drawer on his bedside table.

“Bingo!” she called. He heard her ruffling through the drawer, pulling out a stack of magazines. Billy moved his laundry pile out of the way and she sat on his bed, throwing his copies of *Penthouse, Hustler* and *Playboy* onto his faded comforter. He heard her open one and then let out a strangled gasp.

“Oh my God!” she choked, laughing. “That’s just... That’s her everything. Wow. She is just... Spreading that wide open, huh?”

Billy barked with laughter, throwing his head back. “What, you never looked at girly mags before, Rob?”

“No!” Robin said. “How the hell would I have been able to get girly mags? Not like Jerry at the newsstand on Main would sell them to me…”

“He probably would, he’s fuckin’ skeevy,” Billy snorted.

“Exactly why I wouldn’t buy from him,” Robin sniffed. Then she paused.

“Do you have... *Other* magazines?” she asked mischievously.

“What d’you mean, other magazines?” Billy asked, exhaling smoke and passing the lit cigarette to Robin. She took it from him, inhaling.

“I mean, like... Girly magazines, but, y’know… With guys.”

“Oh.”

Billy rubbed his chin. Nobody else was home. It was just him and Robin. It couldn’t hurt... He lifted his head and nodded over to his closet.

“In a box labelled shoes.”

Robin leapt from his bed and slid open his closet. He reached for his pile of laundry and shook his head, his heart quickening in his chest. He still wasn’t used to being open about who he was, even though he knew his secrets were safe with Robin. Even so, admitting he had dirty magazines of the *other* variety was kinda thrilling... And Billy was nothing if not a thrill seeker. He heard her pop open the box.

“Hoo hoo!” she trilled, pulling out a few magazines. “What hunky boys...”

She sat back down on his bed, dropping copies of *Mandate, Playguy,* and *Freshman* onto the bed. She opened one to the centrefold and yelled, giggling.

“Holy shit!”

“I know it’s your first time seein’ a dick, Rob, but try to be cool about it,” Billy teased, folding a shirt and putting it to the side.

“Whew!” she chortled, flipping through a magazine. “That dude is fuckin’ hung.”

“What one’s that?”

“ *Mandate* ,” Robin said. “Hilarious name for a gay mag, by the way. Uh... February 1982?”

“Oh, that’s the first one I ever got,” Billy said, smiling. “Was about fifteen. Me and Harley used to sneak into places back then, clubs and stuff in West Hollywood and the strip… We ended up at this place one night, super crazy party. We were dancin’ with guys wearin’ like leather chaps and shit, some drag queens, that kinda thing. Found this in the bin outside after we tried to order drinks and they kicked us out ‘cause they realized we were underage. We didn’t even realize it was a gay scene until we were in there and I seen two guys makin’ out.”

Robin was completely silent, absorbing this story like a sponge, desperate to hear more details about a world where they weren’t the only ones. He never really talked about his and Harley’s escapades into the dark clubs and corners of the bars in L.A. He hadn’t wanted anyone but her to know where they’d gone in those hot summer nights of their youth. She’d known who she was, but moving his body to the music, men and women surging around him… *That’s* when he’d known.

“If I remember right, that's the one with Todd Baron as the centrefold, right?” Billy asked. He took his cigarette back from Robin and lay down on the bed beside her on his belly. “Gimme.”

“I mean, you can’t see it...” Robin snorted, handing it to him.

“Describe him to me,” Billy sighed dramatically, opening the centrefold and laying his hand across the photo of Todd Baron’s naked body. “Haven’t seen him in too long...”

“Well!” Robin said briskly, laughing. “He’s naked.”

“Mhm,” Billy sighed, smirking, putting his head down on the left hand page, knowing exactly how Todd Baron was posed and what

putting his head there would look like. She snorted.

“And he’s leaning back, with his—“

“Billy!” Susan called, knocking on his door.

He lifted his head, alarmed. Robin gasped. “Shit!” she whispered, clutching a magazine that had Christy Canyon with her legs wide open.

“Switch spots,” he hissed.

“What?!”

“Billy?” Susan called, concerned, her hand on the doorknob.

Billy threw himself to the side, over top of Robin, who squawked. She shuffled quickly to the left, in front of Billy’s copy of *Mandate.* Billy laid his head down on Christy Canyon’s thigh, his cheeks flushed.

Susan came into the room.

“Oh! Hello, Robin!” Susan greeted, sounding winded. “Billy, I was just— Oh.”

Billy winced slightly as he heard Susan lay eyes on the magazines they were ‘reading.’

“Oh— Oh, I’m sorry, I should have... Sorry,” Susan apologized uncomfortably. “Um, Robin, you can stay for dinner if you like...”

“Oh, thanks, Miss Mayfield,” Robin said, her voice squeaky. “That’d be great.”

“Uh. Sorry Susan,” Billy apologized, fighting a grin.

“Oh— Yes. Well... Alright, I’ll call when dinner’s ready...”

Susan left, closing the door behind her.

Robin snorted softly, starting to giggle. Billy turned on his back, unable to stop himself from bursting out into laughter.

“So smooth...,” Robin wheezed, smacking him on the arm.

“Bye, Rob!” Billy called from the door.

“Bye!” she called back. Billy closed the door and bolted it shut, yawning. Susan was slowly washing a dish in the kitchen down the hall and he winced slightly to himself, laughing under his breath. Supper had been kind of an awkward affair. Thankfully, Max hadn’t noticed. He walked down the hall to the bathroom and began his nightly routine. He brushed his teeth, combed his hair, fluffing it, noting absently that it was getting a little long again. He’d have to ask Steve to give it a trim. Outside it was still almost unbearably humid, heavy clouds cloying the sky and threatening rain. Inside the house the air was tepid, and every window was thrown open to try and tempt a breeze that wasn’t there. Billy splashed water on his face, rubbing the cold water on the back of his neck. It trickled down his back, making goosebumps flutter along his skin. He rubbed his neck, his jaw clenching.

Try as he might to tamp it down, he kept feeling *it* , the *thing* , the trickle of fear like a ghostly finger trailing his spine. He knew it was all in his head, but... Sometimes he thought he could feel the Mind Flayer creeping in, the rot flooding through him. He still woke often in a sweat, confused, terrified, not fully remembering the sequence of events that had happened in his head but sure about what had haunted him, what had terrified him out of sleep. He reached out and touched the bathroom mirror with his hand. With his other hand he traced his face. Only the beginnings of stubble and his smooth skin met his fingertips. No veins. No roots. No scars. He let out a breath.

He knew scars faded naturally over time, but there was something else, something strange about the way the spider-thin lesions in his flesh had disappeared. They hadn’t faded, the way that scars do... They had *retreated* , like something was calling them back, like they had drunk from his flesh and found it poisonous, and were trying to leave his body...

But they had nowhere to go.

“Goodnight, Billy,” Susan called through the bathroom door.

“Goodnight!” he called back, startled, his hand jumping away from the mirror. He held it close to his chest for a moment, hovering over his heart. He squared his shoulders and walked out of the bathroom, going down the hall to the kitchen. He carefully took a glass from the cupboard and turned on the tap, filling it, taking a long drink. He tried to put these disturbing thoughts out of his head. The things from the Upside Down just worked differently. That had to be it. It wasn’t like he’d been in a car accident or something. What he’d been through wasn’t normal. He put his empty cup in the sink. In the hallway just outside the kitchen, the phone rang. He jumped, furrowing his brow. Who the hell was calling at this time of night? It was almost eleven. He went out into the hall and took the phone out of the cradle on the wall.

“Hello?”

He heard a feminine voice on the other end.

“Hi— Hello.”

She sounded vaguely familiar, like her voice had been shaped from fragmented, shadowy memories he half remembered. She sounded hesitant, upset even. There was a long pause where the line crackled in silence between them. Billy let out an annoyed sigh.

“Listen,” he demanded. “It’s late. Who is this?”

“I’m sorry— I didn’t mean to call so late... I forgot there was such a time difference...”

Billy’s heart dropped into his belly. This person was calling from far away... The only people he knew long distance were from his life back in L.A. His mouth went dry.

“I’m looking for Billy Hargrove,” the woman said. “Could you tell me how to find him?”

“I’m— That’s me,” Billy said hoarsely. The way this woman talked tickled at the back of his mind in a way that terrified him.

“Oh— I see,” the woman said. He heard her swallow hard. *“I’m— My*

name is Maggie. I— I'm your aunt."

Billy blinked. He braced himself against the wall, letting out a small breath. His aunt?

"I know you probably don't remember me... We only met a few times, when you were small. I'm... I'm your mother's sister."

Billy's mouth parted and his entire body stilled. "My— My mom?" Billy croaked, feeling sick.

"Yes," Maggie said. Another long silence lapsed between them. *"God... I don't know how to tell you this..."*

Billy's heart was drumming so fast in his chest that he thought he might throw up.

"What?" he asked, barely able to speak.

"My sister Valorie... Your mother... She passed away this afternoon..."

Billy wasn't aware of his body. His mind went completely blank. His aunt's words hit him like a truck, shattering his ability to stay standing. He slid down the side of the wall and onto the floor, holding the phone so loosely it fell out of his hand and clattered against the wall, hanging from its tangled cord.

Dead.

He let out an unintelligible noise, pain radiating through his chest like he'd been shot. Feeling as though he were in a dream, he reached his hand out and found the phone, bringing it to his ear.

"Hello? Hello? Billy?"

"Yes," Billy replied. He couldn't will emotion into his voice, feeling like he was split three different ways.

Dead .

"I'm... I'm so sorry... We're having a funeral for her here in L.A. this Wednesday, and... I don't know if you can come, but I thought you at

least deserved to know…"

Billy went into autopilot, the way he did when his Dad had hit him, shutting down and leaving his entire body and face blank, closing himself off from hurt and misery.

"Can I call you back?" he asked tonelessly.

" *Oh— of course,"* Maggie said. *"Here's my number…"*

She listed off numbers that Billy immediately committed to memory.

"I need to do something," he told his aunt.

Dead .

"Oh— Okay… I'm sorry, Billy," Maggie said, sadly.

Billy couldn't handle it anymore. "I'll call. Goodbye."

He let go of the phone, letting it swing back and forth against the wall. He thought he heard his aunt say goodbye, quietly through the long distance between them. He put his head against the wall, feeling nothing. Time slid by as he stared sightlessly, sitting on the floor, the dial tone beeping quieting from the receiver beside him, the kitchen clock ticking, the fridge running.

Dead .

He felt tears running down his face, and squeezed his eyes shut, hanging his head. How could she? *How could she?* She had abandoned him… And she hadn't even given enough of a shit to find him again before she up and died. Had she really cared so little for him? Was he really that worthless that even his own Mom didn't want him? He clenched his jaw and lashed out at the wall, hitting it, hurting his hand.

Dead .

He stood up in a rush, grabbing the receiver, slamming his hand into the cradle on the wall, hanging up. He held in the button and dialled a different number. He felt faint as the phone rang, putting his arm

above him on the wall to stay standing.

"Hello? " Steve's groggy voice answered after the second ring.

"Steve...," Billy managed, feeling like he was going to choke and die, joining his mother in her early grave.

"Billy?"

"Can you... Could you..."

I need you.

"Can you come over?" Billy asked, swallowing down ragged, angry sobs that wanted to tear into his throat. "Please?"

There was a brief silence.

"I'll be over in twenty minutes," Steve said, his voice serious. *"See you soon."*

He hung up.

Billy put the receiver gently back into the cradle, leaning against it.

Dead.

The house was very quiet.

Steve felt his heart beating double time in his chest as he pulled the keys from the ignition and got out of the car, shutting the door. He looked toward the front porch and saw Billy standing there, half in and half out of the rain, looking very small and desolate against the dim porch and the circle of orange light beaming down on the dark street from a lamp humming high on a telephone pole above his head. It was raining steadily outside. Raindrops pattered in a drone on the tarmac and on the metal of the car.

Something desperate and fearful jumped into his throat and he jogged across the street and up the walk, his sneakers splashing in the puddles forming on the uneven surface between the cracks.

“Billy?” he called breathlessly as he came to a stop, the raindrops splashing into his hair. Billy’s face was pale and drawn. Steve looked down at his hands and saw that he was trembling. Billy’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. He tried to speak several times, but couldn’t get the words to leave his lips. Eventually he gave up and lifted both of his hands, reaching out. Steve grabbed onto him, holding his wrists, letting Billy clutch onto his forearms.

“Are you okay?” he asked, keeping his voice quiet. He had never seen him like this before.

“Can we talk in your car?” Billy managed, sounding like he had rocks in his throat.

“Of course,” Steve said quickly, alarmed. Steve let go of his right hand and led him to the car. They got in.

“God,” Billy whispered, leaning his head back against the headrest. “This is so fucked up...”

He sniffed once, wiping his nose. He flared his nostrils, taking deep breaths, looking like he was trying to find the courage to continue. Then, his words tumbled out of his mouth, unstoppable, like a bleeding wound.

“When I was eight, my Mom left because of my Dad... And I tried to find her, but she never came home, and it was like she... Disappeared off the face of the fuckin’ planet, and now my aunt calls me, her sister, and— and tells me that she’s...”

Billy’s voice became so thick he had to stop speaking. He took a deep breath. Steve could see tears welling in his eyes under the orange glow of the street lamp.

“She tells me that she’s... Dead,” Billy managed, his mouth parted. “And that the funeral is on Wednesday... And...”

Billy swallowed hard. Steve could see him quickly losing his composure, his emotions swelling like a great wave.

“And I can’t even go because I’m broke and I can’t drive... So now I can’t even say goodbye, and...”

Billy was ranting inconsolably now, his throat so constricted he was barely able to get the words out. He brought his hands to his eyes, rubbing them furiously.

“And I don’t even know if I would even want to go because she fucking *left* me...”

He gestured emphatically with a hand toward the windshield.

“She left me with... *Him!* She knew what he was like and she left, and — and I don’t know why she never came back for me, and I...”

His voice finally broke and he stopped talking. He squeezed his eyes shut, tears streaming down his face.

“As much as I wanna be pissed, I just... I can’t do it. I love her. She’s... She’s my *Mom* ,” Billy said, his voice hitching high. He sniffed and let out a quiet sob, lowering his head into his hands.

He was silent for a long time, crying quietly. The rain fell gently all around them in the evening dark, sluicing down the windshield, the windows, tapping the hood of the car. Steve felt so useless, so helpless... He couldn’t believe that after all the suffering Billy had gone through, he had to go through *this* ; the loss of the person who had taught him loss in the first place. Steve genuinely had no idea what to say to comfort him, and had no idea how he could possibly be feeling. He reached out and rubbed Billy’s back, his own eyes feeling very wet.

“Fuck...,” Billy swore softly, sniffing, digging in his pocket and pulling out a pack of cigarettes, bringing one to his lips and lighting it quickly, throwing the empty pack onto the dashboard in disgust. He took a long drag, scraping his hands over his eyes.

“Do you think...,” Steve began, his voice tentative. “Do you think that goin’ to this funeral will change anything? Like...”

Steve started again, trying to figure out how to say what he wanted to say.

“If you went, would it give you closure, or would it just hurt you

more?”

Billy blinked a few times, before shaking his head. “What’s the difference? I can’t go,” he said, sniffing.

“I’d take you,” said Steve. The second Billy told him what happened, his mind had instantly made a decision to help him no matter what the cost. Earlier that week, his Dad had finally offered him a position at the dealership. He’d been internally humming and hawing over it for days now, keeping it to himself, but now he knew what he had to do as though a path had suddenly revealed itself before him.

Billy swallowed, his brow furrowing. His jaw worked, his fingers rubbing his forehead. Steve could tell he was struggling to understand.

“I just... I don’t want you to get hurt more than you already are,” Steve continued in a rush, explaining himself. “If being there will just hurt you and leave you worse off, then you shouldn’t go. But... If this funeral is something that will help you get some closure... I want you to be there, y’know?”

For many minutes, Billy was silent. He smoked three cigarettes and Steve kept his hand on his back, making sure he had a connection to something living and breathing and loving, a lifeline to keep him from drowning in the death and misery he was mired in.

“What about your job?” Billy asked eventually, shaking his head. “You can’t just randomly take like two weeks off...”

“Fuck the Family Video,” Steve said, his voice intense. “They can fire me for all I care. This is important.”

“Steve,” Billy implored, his throat rough. “Come on, man... You can’t do that...”

“Actually...” Steve said, feeling self-conscious and like what he was about to say wasn’t exactly appropriate. “My Dad kinda offered me a position with his dealership... And I was on the fence about taking it, ‘cause— Well. It doesn’t matter, but—“

“What— Steve, it does matter!” Billy said forcefully, turning his face

toward him, his voice trembling with emotion. “This— It’s your life, man… It matters…”

“No— Really...” Steve stuttered, trying to get out of explaining himself. He let out a short sigh and then gave up. “I wasn’t sure if I wanted to take it, ‘cause I was afraid I’d end up stuck here in Hawkins, but... Lately... It doesn’t seem so bad. And anyways, if I ever wanted to leave this town, there’s other dealerships and positions for douchebags selling cars, right?”

Billy’s lips parted, his chest heaving.

“You— Don’t just take the job on a… A whim or somethin,’ man…”

“I’m not,” Steve said gently. “And it’s not like I have to do that for the rest of my life, right?”

Billy sniffed, exhaling cigarette smoke, his eyes puffy with tears, rubbing his nose.

“And hey,” Steve chuckled softly, “If that means I get to quit the fuckin’ Family Video sooner rather than later, that’s okay in my book. It doesn’t start until early October, so… I’d have some time off.”

Steve rubbed his back, letting Billy know what he left unsaid: *Some time off to be with* you.

“Why would you do somethin’ like this for me?” Billy asked, his voice a broken murmur.

“If it’s important to you, it’s important to me,” Steve said softly. He had learned not to feel hurt or sad when Billy asked this question, because it came from a place that was learning to be kinder, learning to be softer. Billy closed his eyes, a couple of stray tears winding their way down his cheeks.

“Hey,” Steve said softly, the leather seat squeaking as he turned in his seat. “Hey, now... It’s okay...”

His own eyes watered sharply. He had seen Billy broken, seen Billy terrified… And this was worse. He looked like he was *aching* . Steve slid his hand from Billy’s back and cupped his face with both of his

hands, using his thumbs to wipe the tears flicking from his eyelashes.

“I was such a dick to you,” Billy said thickly, his eyes squeezed shut, his brow furrowed.

Steve chuckled softly. “Listen... We’ve all been there. Life is hard. I forgave you, a long time ago. Hell— I forgave you before we were even friends.”

Steve’s hands fell from Billy’s face. Billy swallowed, his eyes opening.

“I think... I think I need to touch my Mom’s face. One last time,” Billy said, his voice constricted but certain. “I need to know. If I don’t figure out what happened, it’ll...”

Billy stopped, sighing quietly, his breath hitching. “I been wondering since I was eight why she left... Where she was, what she was doin’... If I don’t find that out, I think I’ll go crazy...”

“Okay,” Steve said simply.

He’d call the Family Video and quit. Who cared? Robin didn’t work there anymore, anyway, and that had been the only reason he’d stayed. He would say Yes to his father’s offer. He had some money left over, and it would be good to take a few weeks off. He’d spend them with Billy. Whatever he needed.

“Thanks, Steve,” Billy whispered.

August 10th, 1986

Billy waded through the water, rippling and still as glass. He heard shadows moving in the inky darkness, whispering voices. He heard concrete crumbling, fires burning, felt eyes staring and flares of life all around. His body moved like sinew through the nothingness, something calling him far into the night. He saw a flicker and turned.

He saw someone move and when he blinked, they were gone.

“It’s here, it’s here, it’s here…,” *a quiet voice echoed from across the*

distance. “Kill it, kill it, kill it…”

“What’s here?” *he asked, his voice loud across the emptiness.*

“It’s here, it’s here, it’s here…,” *the voice whispered. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, he saw a child, a stranger to him. They were thin, their skin milky and translucent, their short-cropped hair white. Their eyes stared up at him, two pink orbs. The child extended a hand and he bent so they could reach him.*

“Kill it, kill it, kill it…,” *they whispered, their lips unmoving.*

“Where are you?” *Billy asked, the child’s fingers freezing in his skin.*

“Between, between, between…,” *echoed the voice.* “Lost, lost, lost…”

The child’s hands slid from his face.

“Kill it.”

Billy’s eyes flung open. He lifted a hand to his face, where the child had touched him. His skin was cold. He had broken out into a sweat, shivering, trembling under the thin, cheap sheets.

“Hey, you good?” Steve asked sleepily from the bed beside him.

Billy breathed in and out, trying to stop himself from panicking. The room smelled of cigarette smoke and his mind ricocheted off of his most recent memories trying to find where he was.

They were in Beaver, Utah— The last leg of their journey until they were in Los Angeles. They were in a motel. He swallowed.

“Yeah,” he said, trying to sound more confident than he felt. “I’m okay.”

August 11th, 1986

As they drove into the outskirts of L.A., Steve got turned around a few times, and Billy only spoke to try and suggest where to go next to fix his mistake. He didn’t even sound angry. Steve got the impression

that now that they'd finally arrived in L.A., he wasn't keen on rushing. He had been very quiet for the entire drive from Indiana to California, only perking up slightly once they had come over a desert hill and Steve had told him that the ocean was in sight, in the distance. Then it was gone again.

Steve turned into the parking lot of a cheap motel on the outer rim of the city. It wasn't anything special, just a little dive off the side of the massive freeway leading into the city centre, but it would do. They just needed a place to lay their heads. It was evening, and Steve could barely keep his eyes open. It was with great relief that he finally got the key to their room and opened the door, throwing his bag onto the carpet and striding in, clicking on the window air conditioner. He watched Billy step across the threshold, and he took his hand, closing the door behind him and flicking on the overhead lights. He walked Billy across the room, watching as he counted under his breath, and showed him where everything was.

"I'm fuckin' starving," Steve said. He'd seen an In-And-Out Burger nearby from the freeway and loathe as he was to get into the car again, he needed food.

"Here, I'll go get food— Just stay here and cool down," Steve offered, putting a hand on Billy's shoulder.

"Okay," Billy said quietly.

Steve sighed, upset that there wasn't anything he could do to make Billy feel better. He knew that he just needed to feel whatever it was he needed to feel, but still… He hated seeing someone he cared so much about going through something like this. He wondered how much pain a guy could go through before he broke, and he was unhappily aware that this was probably it.

"I'll be back. Twenty minutes. I promise," Steve said softly, moving a strand of hair out of Billy's eyes. "Strawberry shake?"

"Yeah," Billy nodded, looking down. "Okay."

"Okay," Steve said, smiling sadly. He slid his hand up and lifted Billy's chin, then gave his cheek a gentle nudge with his knuckle. He

went out the door then paused.

“Oh— No pickles, right?”

“No pickles,” Billy repeated back to him.

“Alright,” Steve said. “See you in a bit. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. Love you.”

He left.

As he walked down the stairs he hummed absently to himself. Behind him, Billy stepped out of the room and stared sightlessly after him, his mouth parted, a pink flush on his cheeks.

The sun was finally down, but it was still swelteringly hot. Billy sat in a creaking lawn chair outside their motel room, smoking a cigarette, his head full and his heart heavy. Tomorrow was his mother’s wake, and the day after that, her funeral. He lifted his head and listened to cars speeding down the freeway, toward the centre of the sprawling city. The heat coming down from the Mojave sifted through the smell of smog and oil and coiled like a flame in his nose. He closed his eyes and tried to remember the loamy and humid soil of Hawkins, the damp earth nourishing the lush greens into life. He felt melancholy that the sharp tang of the desert heat wasn’t familiar to him anymore. He heard the door to their room open and Steve walked out, propping it open with a shoe. He sat down on a lawn chair near him and sighed, lighting a cigarette. He could tell Steve was exhausted.

“Sorry I couldn’t take over some of the drivin,’” Billy said, not knowing what else to say. He felt like if he started talking he wouldn’t be able to control what came out.

“Not your fault,” Steve said, yawning. “I’m just gonna probably hit the hay soon.”

“Me too,” Billy said. The wake started at 10am, and Billy was anxious to get it over with. Once he could prove to himself that his Mom was really gone… Well. He didn’t know what was gonna happen after that. They smoked in silence, then turned in. Billy climbed into bed

and closed his eyes, lying on his back, trying to push down the nausea rolling in his guts.

He'd been having the same dream for months now, confused, disoriented dreams of darkness and wading through water. For the first time, four days ago, someone else had appeared in the darkness. He was terrified to go to sleep, terrified of what the ghostlike child was trying to tell him. He listened absently as Steve got into bed, yawning, the mattress creaking. He pulled the chain on the light and shuffled down into his covers. Billy wanted to tell Steve… He knew he'd want to know… He clenched his jaw and tried to stop himself from talking. He couldn't tell Steve. He shouldn't tell Steve...

"I had a dream last night," Billy said into the dark room. He let out a breath. He couldn't stop it now.

"Oh?" Steve asked.

"Yeah," Billy said, licking his lips. "Actually… I been havin' this dream a lot…"

"What's the dream?"

"It's dark. I'm sorta… Walking through water, but it's really still water. Nothing moves. The water is dark too, and then this… This kid shows up. Pale skin. Short white hair, like a buzz cut. Pink eyes. An albino, maybe, I dunno… Then they… Touch my head and then… Talk to me."

There was a heavy pause. "What does the kid say?"

"The kid says… 'Kill it,'" Billy whispered.

A silence lapsed between them.

"It's just a dream, right?" Steve said, trying to sound encouraging.

"Right," Billy muttered. "Just a dream."

Billy stared sightlessly into the ceiling of their motel room, listening to the distant sounds of car motors and people talking. Then, he heard Steve get up. A few moments later, Billy felt a rush of cool air

against his skin as the covers of his bed were pulled back, and he rocked back and forth on the mattress as Steve climbed in bed with him. There was a pause between them. Billy could tell Steve was debating asking him more or just brushing the dream off. Billy had no idea which one he actually wanted.

“Tell me more about this kid,” Steve asked him finally, his breath tickling the side of Billy’s face.

“That’s all I know,” Billy said, swallowing, picturing the thin child in his mind. “I asked them where they were and they said ‘Between’ and ‘Lost.’”

Steve was quiet for a while.

“The dark place… With the water? That’s where Eleven goes.”

Billy turned his face to Steve. “What?”

“When El’s looking for someone… That’s where she goes. To this dark place… That’s how she found you, last summer. The kids call it Plane Walking, something from that D&D game they play. It means, like… She walks on different planes of existence. Different dimensions.”

“You think… You think I’m walking on the planes? In like… Different dimensions?”

“I dunno,” Steve said. He licked his lips. “That, or maybe someone is… Calling you. Maybe someone wants you to find them.”

Billy’s heart thudded in his chest.

“It’s not dead,” he whispered.

“What?”

“The thing. The Mind Flayer thing… It’s still alive.”

“It can’t be,” Steve said quickly, confidently. “No way. We cut off the gate. It has no way of getting back. It fed off the gate, you know? It can’t live without a link to its world.”

“The kid told me. The pale kid. They touched my head and it said it’s… That it’s here…”

Billy touched his forehead with a hand. He was trembling. A cold sweat had broken out across his skin. “It’s still here…”

Billy squeezed his eyes shut, tears leaking down his face. Steve moved on the mattress, and he felt himself being bundled into Steve’s arms, the side of his face pressed into his bare chest, Steve holding him close. He felt Steve put his forehead on his, rubbing his hands along his spine.

“You’re safe,” Steve said quietly. “You’re okay. Whatever it is, we’ll beat it. I promise.”

Billy let out a breath. “Fuck,” he swore, his throat constricted. “I fucking hate this… I hate the nightmares, and I hate the scars, and I just…”

He trailed off. He didn’t even know what he wanted, not really, but he knew he was exhausted and tired of feeling this way. The only thing that felt good and right in this moment was that Steve was there, and that he was holding him, and that he was thousands of miles away from anyone who could see and judge him for it.

“I dunno,” Billy said, his cheek on Steve’s upper chest, sniffing loudly. “Whatever.”

Steve let out a soft snort of laughter, his belly bouncing.

“You have shit luck, dude,” Steve said, his voice fond and gentle. He felt Steve's finger moving his hair out of his face. Billy snorted softly, a tiny ironic smile on his lips. He closed his eyes.

“Some guys have all the luck,” Steve sang quietly down at him, stroking his hair. *“Some guys have all the pain. Some guys get all the breaks—“*

“That’s you,” Billy interjected, laughing softly.

“Some guys do nothin’ but complain,” Steve continued, his singing lilting upward in laughter. He prodded Billy. “That’s you.”

Billy shook his head. Steve readjusted himself, yawning, holding him closer. He took Billy's hand, and he let him. He thought about how lonely he had been for so long, and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. He put his Mom out of his mind, put the pale child out of his head, just for the moment. He tried to focus on Steve's soft breathing, how he was slowly falling asleep.

Love you, love you, love you…

Steve had thrown those words over his shoulder so casually, teasing, not really meaning them… But the way he was holding him now made his heart hope that maybe, just maybe, he *did* mean them.

Billy thought about all the people he'd pushed away and held Steve closer, feeling repentant.

He got it now.

August 12th, 1986

Steve was absolutely exhausted from driving for four days, but he held on, sipping a coffee and adjusting his black suit jacket, sitting on the creaky bed and waiting for Billy to come out of the bathroom. When he did, he walked slowly, unsure, and stopped in the middle of the room. His face was pale, his expression set, like he was lost in thought.

Steve stood and reached out, smoothing the shoulders of Billy's dark jacket. The dim light of the lamp on the desk cast shadows on his face. He got a flash of déjà vu to happier times, when he had been standing in his bedroom back in Hawkins, just before they had left for Robin and Nancy's prom. He grasped Billy's shoulders and looked into his face.

"Is Harley gonna come?" Steve asked, adjusting Billy's collar absentmindedly.

"We missed her," Billy sighed. "She was already on her way to Hawkins when we were on our way here. We might've even passed her without realizing."

“Well... She’ll be there when we get back,” Steve said soothingly. “We all will.”

“Yeah.”

Steve swallowed. “Well... I know it’s not exactly the time, but... You look nice.”

“Thanks,” Billy mumbled, playing with the cuff of his dress shirt. “Susan lent me some money. Didn’t have anything good for a funeral.”

Steve blinked slowly and nodded. “We should go,” Steve said.

“I...,” Billy began. He stopped. “Never mind. Let’s just go...”

Billy touched the face of his mother, lying cold in the casket, and felt nothing. This face felt nothing like the skin he had touched as a child, and even if he could see her, the eyes which had been so warm when he was small would be closed to him now forever. They would never look at him again. He told himself it was better this way, that he couldn’t see her and she couldn’t see him. The more he’d mulled on the edges of the room, awkward and apart, a stranger in a place full of family he’d never met or didn’t remember, he realized that this woman, his Mom, was a stranger to him.

He felt someone standing near, and knew it was Steve.

Billy knew there were a few people standing nearby, waiting for him to be done so they could take their turn looking in on his mother, saying how well she looked, how she was at peace now. Billy realized he didn’t even know her well enough to know if she *was* at peace; if this death was a death that she had welcomed or had raged against. The last conversation he’d ever had with her had been over the phone, begging for her to come back to him.

And she never had. She had left him.

Billy stood up, pulling his hand back from her skin like he’d been burned, his eyes stinging. Steve wordlessly took his arm and steered him through the small crowd gathered to grieve a woman he’d never

got a chance to know, out of the parlour, though the hall, and then down the steps to the funeral home. Billy scrambled for a cigarette and lit it, smoking, clenching his jaw, his nostrils flaring. Steve stood quietly by, letting him do what he needed to do.

“She... She fucking left me— Again!” Billy said, his voice low, tears pricking his eyes. “She... Why would she fucking do that? What the fuck could have possibly made her leave me with Neil? She knew! She knew what he was, and she— She left me!”

“She didn’t want to,” a quiet voice interrupted. Billy spun his head around, hearing someone come near. Her voice was familiar. After a few moments, he realized who it was: his aunt Maggie, his mother’s sister.

Billy tried to speak, overwhelmed, making a few choking and indistinct noises in his throat. “She— Who cares if she didn’t want to, she did,” Billy growled.

“She...” His aunt stopped and sighed, swallowing. “I... I want to tell you what happened,” she said. “You were only eight years old, so... I know you’re hurt, and I understand, but... There was a lot that happened that you didn’t know about. You were only little...”

Billy was filled with rage and his aunt’s words sickened him. Yeah, he’d been little— A little kid whose mother had upped and left him with someone she knew would hurt him. His hand clenched the railing on the steps to the funeral home so hard they felt numb. He flopped down onto the concrete stairs, the bright California sun annoying him for the first time in his entire life. How could it be so bright and cheery when he felt like this? At least Hawkins had the decency to rain.

His aunt sat beside him, and put a hand on his shoulder. He tensed and resisted the urge to shrug her off, not because he didn’t want to, but because despite how much he hated the words coming out of his aunt’s mouth right then, a deeper part of him needed to know what had happened. He *had* to know.

“Well...,” his aunt began, licking her lips. “Do you know why your Mom left?”

“My Dad,” Billy grunted bluntly, pursing his lips and tapping his cigarette.

“Partially,” his aunt said. “She… She and your father were getting a divorce because of the… Abuse. But… She tried to get custody of you, but she… She lost the case. I know that you know your Dad, and I can’t imagine what you’ve been going through living with him all these years…”

Billy absorbed this information, his anger hanging on, the words he was hearing crashing against his fury and making him feel sick.

“So?” he demanded, interrupting. “She could have come to see me.”

“She couldn’t,” his aunt whispered, upset. “Your Dad got full custody of you. Your Mom… She’d struggled with drugs all her life. The abuse made her using… Worse. She tried to get custody of you, but… She wasn’t doing well, and your Dad used her drug problem against her, and…Not only did she lose custody of you… She was told she wasn’t allowed to see you anymore. She told me, after, that she called you… Even though it wasn't allowed. She said… She said she just needed to hear from you one more time.”

Billy’s lips parted, and tears streamed down his face. The call he’d gotten from his mother…All she had said during that call, so long ago, as he begged and pleaded for her to come home was *‘I love you, Billy. I love you.’*

She hadn’t even been able to say goodbye. All she had been able to bear was to tell him she loved him.

“After that, she wasn’t the same,” his aunt continued. “She was severely depressed… She started using almost every day… She felt like she’d failed you… She was very lost, for a long time, and she never… Well. She never recovered. She got sick, and…”

His aunt trailed off.

Billy felt the flames licking at his fingers and he let the cigarette drop to the pavement. The three of them were silent for a few moments and then his aunt’s hand slid from his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry, Billy,” she said quietly. “All I can tell you is that she never stopped thinking about you. And... That she loved you very, very much.”

His aunt leaned in and gave him a hug. Then, she stood and went back inside.

“Steve,” Billy said, after a few minutes. “I want to leave.”

“Okay,” Steve said quietly.

Steve left the bathroom of their motel room, a towel around his shoulders, absentmindedly drying his damp hair. He came into the room, the dim lamps above the two beds casting a low glow on the room. The thin green carpet stretched beneath his bare feet like a forest. Billy stood in the middle of the room, changed out of his formal clothes, wearing a pair of jeans and a loose t-shirt. He was holding the keys to the Camaro in his hands, running his fingers over the worn Snoopy keychain, over and over. Steve stopped near, drying the inside of his ear, looking at him sadly. Billy’s head was bent, his bangs covering his eyes.

“I’m sorry it turned out this way,” Steve said quietly.

“Yeah,” Billy said, his voice trying really hard to be calm, his mouth turned in a frown that was holding in a lot that he couldn’t say. Steve threw the towel onto the bed. He had nothing to say.

“She picked drugs over me,” Billy said, his voice a poisonous whisper, hatred and loathing and grief trembling on his lips.

Steve swallowed.

“She— She could have stopped!” Billy said, his voice rising, his eyes wide. He threw the keychain across the room and it clunked against the wallpaper. “She could have been there! She could’ve just… She could’ve stopped, but she didn’t! She could’ve… *She couldv’e fucking saved me from him!”*

Steve let out a breath, his shoulders going slack.

“Did she even give a shit?” Billy demanded, choking. “Did she even… She even…”

Billy put his head in his hands. “I just… I just can’t help but thinkin’...”

He closed his mouth, lifting his face toward Steve. His eyes were wide and shining with tears, his eyebrows wound in pain and grief.

“Do you think... Do you think it was *my* fault?” Billy asked, his voice a tiny whisper.

Steve squeezed his eyes shut.

“Did I— Did I do something wr-wrong?” Billy whispered, his voice hitching. Billy could barely speak. A sob broke through his voice.

“Was it... Me? Did I— did—“

Steve threw himself forward, wrapping his arms around Billy and yanking him tight, burying his head in the side of his neck, holding him as though if he let his grip loosen Billy would be swept away.

Billy fell to crying, low keening sounds welling up from his throat that were so heavy with an indescribable, aching grief that Steve felt his own resolve to be strong fail in one fell swoop. They sank to the ground, onto their knees, clutching one another. Hot tears streamed from Steve’s eyes, an unstoppable wave of heartbreak and sorrow crashing over and drowning him. He sniffed, gasping for air. He hadn’t had time to cry for Nancy, for the life he thought he was going to live. He knew it was a pathetic hurt alongside the void of pain and anguish that Billy had been carrying with him since he was a child, but it welled up and cascaded out of his soul like a flood-tide. He cried for how rude he had been to people who didn’t deserve it, how his priorities had been so wrong for so very long.

He cried because he knew, in that moment, that *this* was what was important, this tenderness, this closeness... For the last few years he had been floating along, unsure of what he stood for, and now he finally knew. He thought about everyone he loved, the bravery of all the kids, Robin’s friendship, Nancy’s genius, the tenacity of Mrs.

Byers and Jonathan. He thought about Billy's strength, what it had taken to survive all these years. He thought about Billy's sweetness. His gentleness. It was rare— But it was there, like the little flowers that poked through the cracks in the pavement in search of the warm sun, flourishing despite the effort to cover them. He could tell that every fibre in Billy's body wanted gentleness, and to be gentle. He remembered, suddenly, that on their first awkward drive together, Billy had touched him twice. First, when he had pushed the ashtray over and Billy had patted the top of his hand— Then later, he had gently guided Steve through the gearshift. A thousand instances where Billy had reached out to touch him over the course of the last year flashed in his mind, and how many times Steve had reached out and taken his hand; first out of occasional necessity, and then out of pleasure. He couldn't remember the last time that he had taken Billy by the wrist, or led him along behind. Nowadays, he took his hand, walked side by side with him.

Something beautiful and terrifying bloomed warmly in his chest. He wasn't ready to define it yet, so he turned his head and whispered into Billy's hair.

"Shh," he hushed, gently, rubbing a soothing hand down his back. "It wasn't your fault. None of this was your fault..."

"I'm just like him... I'm just like my Dad.... I...," Billy moaned, choking.

"No, you're not," Steve said firmly. "You're…"

He pulled away from the hug, his eyes wet, and put his hands on either side of Billy's face.

"Hey," he hushed. "Listen. You are not like him. You... You're..."

What was Billy?

"You are *not* a bad person. You've got a good heart... You were just hurting, and you had nobody to help you. You did your best... And nobody can ask any more from you."

Billy squeezed his eyes shut, his face pained.

“Now you do have somebody. Lots of people,” Steve said, licking his lips. “You got Max, and you got Harley, and—and Robin, and Nancy, and all the kids, and Eleven... And you’ve got... You’ve got *me.* ”

Billy raised a hand, placing it over his own where he held the side of his face. Billy closed his eyes and leaned into his palm, looking so tired, so sad.

“I don’t deserve you,” Billy whispered.

“Who cares if you deserve me or not? You’ve got me, and that’s all that matters,” Steve chuckled, his voice thick. He had tears in his eyes for wholly different reasons this time. Billy opened his eyes, his lips parted, as though he had surprised him somehow. A tiny, minuscule smile lifted the corner of his lips even through the heavy stream of tears that cascaded down his cheeks.

“There,” Steve smiled gently, sniffing, trying to stop himself from crying. “There’s that smile.”

Billy’s lips were so pink, so lovely, their Cupid’s bow so perfect. Had Billy always had such incredibly lovely eyes? Had he always had such elegant eyelashes, that lovely dimple in his cheek when he smiled? Steve knew in his heart that the answer was *yes* — That he had always been beautiful, but he had simply not allowed himself to see it. He saw it now. He saw the ways that Billy cared, rough and hesitant at first, but with his whole heart. Steve knew that he’d had nobody to show him how to be tender, no road map to follow, no way of knowing how to be loving and sweet, but he was loving and sweet anyways; gruffly awkwardly, sincerely.

Billy had chosen to be kinder and softer when his father had bullied him into being mean and tough. He had chosen gentleness when his father had taught him violence, trust when his father had hurt him into fear.

Billy had chosen love.

“You aren’t like your Dad because every day, despite the shit he put you through, you make the decision to be a better person,” Steve whispered, putting his forehead against Billy’s, willing him to accept

it, to believe it. Billy was quiet for a long time, and Steve didn't pressure him to speak. When he finally did speak, his voice was quiet and sincere.

"I couldn't understand why you wanted to be nice to me, why you'd want to be my friend...," Billy said, sniffing quietly. "But every time we were together I wanted to be better, y'know? I wanted to trust you, and... I'm glad I did. You made me want to be a better person. It was all you, Steve."

"Oh, stop... It wasn't all me," Steve laughed, his cheeks glowing pink. "You were the one making the decisions, not me..."

Billy smiled a little. "Yeah... But you... You showed me people can change, for the better. I needed to see that."

Steve sniffed loudly, swallowing a lump in his throat, his eyes wet. "God," he whispered, bringing his other hand up to hold Billy's face, his forehead still pressed against his. "You must have been so scared..."

Billy's eyes were closed. His other hand laid itself on his, holding onto his wrists like he were a life raft.

"I tried so hard to be brave," Billy breathed. "I tried... Steve, I tried so hard..."

Not knowing what else to do, Steve held Billy close. They sat together on the damp, thin carpet of the cheap motel floor for a long, long time, the neon lights of Los Angeles winking at them through the threadbare curtains.

August 14th, 1986

Steve revved the engine and looked to his left. The ocean sparkled at him under the warm sun, and he let out a sigh. The wind was warm and intoxicating. In the passenger seat, Billy's head leaned against the headrest, his hair fluttering around his face, his skin pale, his expression listless and faraway. He hadn't moved since they'd gotten into the car, winding their way back to the freeway that would bring

them back to Indiana. Steve felt restless, curving along the freeway, driving in the opposite direction from the ocean. In his rear view mirror he caught a beach, and bit his lip. He pulled to the side of the road, a car honking angrily at him. He turned around quickly, driving illegally into a stop-gap, and went into the other side of the road. He merged, another car honking its displeasure and its driver giving him the finger. He smiled, going faster, driving toward the ocean.

“The fuck was that?” Billy asked.

“I wanna go to the beach,” Steve said.

“Dude, if we don’t leave now we won’t make it back by Saturday.”

“Whatever,” Steve said, adjusting his sunglasses on his nose, feeling giddy. “One more night in L.A. won’t kill us I don’t think.”

“Don’t you have one last shift at Family Video?”

“Jesus, Billy, break a rule for once in your life!” Steve teased lightly, swatting him.

A little smile cracked onto Billy’s face, like a sudden sun over the crest of a hill. Steve turned his head quickly and basked in it. He thought idly to himself that if he got to see that every day for the rest of his life, he’d be okay.

He turned off the freeway and onto a side road.

The water was salty and sweet, swelling forward and warmly and caressing his legs, swirling around him and then receding. Steve floated, the ocean rocking him back and forth, and watched as Billy’s lithe form lay flat on his surfboard, his arms paddling, heading for a line of waves breaking in the distance. Steve watched as he stood, balancing straight like an arrow piercing the sky. The nose of the board caught the wave as it rose, and his feet slid apart, his bare back curved against the tide, his arms out like a bird in flight. He curved with the rolling ocean, his board catching the wave, sliding along it and curling over it expertly. The sun was starting to sink in the west, tinting the sky in pink and tangerine that faded into blue. Steve

wasn't used to the ocean, its never ending vastness, and it amazed him every time he laid eyes on it. The water that sprayed lightly over Billy's face had maybe trickled over the toes of someone far away, had carried whale song, had crashed on rocks in faraway places that Steve would never see with his own eyes. To him, the sea had always been uncanny, uncomfortably vast.

But to Billy...

He watched as Billy's eyes closed, his feet switching on the board, riding the wave down. He couldn't see his expression from this far, but he could see the relaxed flow of his muscles, the rocking of his hips as the water surged under his feet. He was lost in it, the light of the sinking sun outlining him in brightness, his long, wet hair flying in the wind. Billy wasn't afraid. He didn't fear the waves that had knocked Steve off of his board, paid no mind to the beastly sea that had made Billy himself lose his footing a few times. He had resurfaced from the chaotic spray, shaking his sopping hair from his face, clutching the side of his surfboard, and climbed back on. Undeterred, unyielding, he sliced through the surf, climbed back onto the mountains building deep in the depths of the sea.

Steve watched him, his heart sad and full, and loved his bravery. Above his head, gulls screeched and fluttered on the wind. Billy slid toward him, the wave breaking and pulling him near the beach where Steve was watching. Steve leaned down on his board and paddled toward him.

"I'm here!"

Billy sat down on his surfboard, his feet in the water, his hands in front of him, balancing on the smooth white surface. Steve angled himself, facing the sunset, and leaned over to pull Billy beside him, facing him toward the light.

"That was awesome!" Steve said enthusiastically. "I didn't think you could do it not seeing, but... Proved me wrong!"

Billy looked sad and contemplative, but there was a peace in his expression that told Steve he was going to be okay. "Well... I wouldn't do it if the beach was crowded, cause I'd probably kill

somebody, but... It's kinda late in the day, gettin' cooler..."

"It's so weird people think that this temperature is cool," Steve chuckled softly. "Like, this is bath water to me."

"Yeah, well. They're used to blazing heat most of the time."

" *Them* , huh?" Steve said, laughing softly. "Don't you mean *'we,'* California boy?"

Billy blinked slowly and the corner of his lip curled in a tiny, soft smile. "No," he said quietly. "This place... L.A... It don't feel like home anymore. As much as I love it."

"Oh," Steve said, surprised, not knowing what else to say. He realized that he'd always secretly expected Billy to leave Hawkins one day. He supposed he'd even been betting on it. Steve looked into the sunset, and wished he was blessed with Robin's ability to be poetic and descriptive, because it was resplendent and golden, and he wanted more than anything for Billy to see it too.

"The sunset is beautiful," he told him, telling him anyway, even though he knew he wouldn't do it justice.

"Oh yeah?" Billy asked quietly, lifting his head and turning his face a little toward him. Steve looked at him and felt his mouth part.

The day before, he had finally allowed himself to admit that he found Billy more than handsome. The feeling he got when he looked at Billy was deeper than that, something that put a glow on his handsome face that he could only see by knowing him better. He'd been handsome to begin with— even Steve could admit that— but laughing with him, crying with him... Steve thought he had never seen anyone more beautiful, anyone he was more happy to see.

Billy sat in the golden light of the sun that was slowly dipping into the sea, his damp curls fluttering in the wind, the rays of light reaching out like gentle fingertips to put bright diamonds in his blue eyes. His eyes flicked to Billy's lips, pink and smiling softly. He let himself look, let himself linger. Billy's whole face was soft, peace sitting in the curve of his spine, his body rocking gently in the

rhythm of the water.

“Yeah,” Steve whispered, realizing he hadn’t replied. “It’s… Beautiful.”

Billy turned his face toward the sun and he closed his eyes, his eyelashes resting on his cheeks, his skin tinged in orange and gold. Steve extended a hand and slid his fingers down Billy’s arm, landing on his hand. He took his palm, lacing their fingers together, dipping their hands into the cool and beautiful water, swaying together, letting the water push them back toward the shore. They did not speak. They didn’t need to.

As the sun finally disappeared under the sea, Billy pulled their hands out of the water and brought Steve’s knuckles to his lips. He pressed a small kiss on them, and then extended his hand back into the water, letting go.

“Thank you, Steve,” he said quietly, genuinely.

Steve’s heart leapt into his throat. The incredible and terrifying feeling that he’d felt the day before gripped its roots deeper, planting itself in his heart.

Steve let it.

He realized, now, that it had been growing for a very long time.

17. "(Billy) Don't Lose My Number" - Phil Collins (1985)

August 25th, 1986

“You got it?” Steve grunted, lifting the end of a wooden bookshelf.

“Yup,” Robin called back. They wobbled over to the open back doors of Harley’s van and slid the heavy bookcase into the back. Steve stepped away, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand.

“There,” he said, satisfied, smiling at Robin.

“We all ready to go?” asked Harley, coming around the side of the van, arm in arm with Billy.

“I think so,” Steve said, putting his hands on his hips. They were parked at the far end of the Church Street Plaza parking lot, facing the Denny’s. Nancy pushed herself off of Steve’s car where she had been leaning. She was driving to Indiana State with her Mom early the next morning. Robin’s mother had already said a quietly tearful goodbye back at the farmhouse as she helped her daughter pile her bags and a couple pieces of furniture into Steve’s car. Harley had arrived in Hawkins earlier that week. When she’d caught sight of Billy, she’d leapt from the van, barely taking the time to turn it off and put it in park, throwing herself around Billy’s shoulders. The few days following Steve and Billy’s return to Hawkins had been a bit somber and sad. Steve knew Nancy and Robin weren’t going far, and that he would probably see them more often than he thought he would... But it still felt bittersweet to see them go.

He wouldn’t hold either of them back for the world, but that didn’t mean he didn’t wish he could hold onto them both a little longer. He knew things were changing, like the tinge of cold on the breeze that hung around the mornings as the days crept closer to September, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

“Well... I guess this is goodbye for now,” Robin said, breaking the silence. She walked across the circle and wrapped her arms around Billy’s waist. He gathered her in his arms, holding her tight, and lifted her off the ground, making her laugh. Steve smiled warmly at

Harley and gave her a hug as Billy set Robin back down on the pavement.

“I’m gonna miss you, you rat mullet slut,” Robin sniffed, smiling, tapping Billy fondly on the side of his face. He let out a laugh.

“I’ll miss you too, you fuckin’ weirdo,” he said back, his voice warm.

Harley said goodbye to Billy and Nancy as Robin came over to him. Steve cleared his throat, feeling teary eyed as she looked up at him, an ironic and sweet smile lifting the corners of her lips. He had so much he wanted to tell her, but he had run out of time to figure out what he needed to say. He pulled Robin into a fierce hug, and she sniffed as she wrapped her arms around him too. He squeezed his eyes shut, and wondered not for the first time what he’d done to be rewarded with such interesting and loving people.

Robin pulled away and held him at arm's length, looking him over.

“You better call me in two days,” she warned him teasingly. “We have a lot of talking to do, you and I.”

“Sure do,” Steve snorted. Robin didn’t know the half of it. Or… Maybe she did. He wouldn’t put it past her. He watched as Robin said a quick goodbye to Nancy. They would see each other soon— There wasn’t any reason to stand on ceremony.

“Well— Goodbye,” Billy said to Robin and Harley, putting a cigarette in his mouth. “You girls be good.”

“You know we won’t,” Harley giggled, closing the back door of the van. They got into the cab, and the engine started. Harley turned in the parking lot, their hands waving out the windows ... And then they were gone. Steve watched them for a long time as the Econoline disappeared into the distance.

“My Mom’s here,” Nancy said quietly.

Steve blinked and turned, spying the wood panelled station wagon that Mrs. Wheeler drove parking a little ways away. Nancy went over to Billy and gently embraced him. She whispered something in his ear and then pulled back. Billy blinked a few times, his mouth

parting. Then he closed it and nodded. Steve didn't pry— Whatever Nancy had to say to Billy was her business. They had a very strange relationship, one of few words but undeniable affection. He supposed each one of them would always have a tender place in their hearts for anyone who had fought the Upside Down. Then Nancy turned to him, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and gave him a small, pretty smile. Steve looked down at her fondly. He opened his arms wide and she walked into them. He held her head against his shoulder, rubbing her back, remembering how it felt to hold her in his arms, remembering how nice she smelled. After a few moments she stepped back, her eyes wet, her cheeks flushed.

"I'm proud of you, Nance," Steve said, putting his hands on her shoulders.

"Thanks Steve," Nancy smiled at him. She looked down at the pavement as his hands slid from her shoulders, then looked back up at him, her eyes sparkling in humour.

"For what it's worth," she said, fighting a grin, "You weren't just a good babysitter. You were a pretty good boyfriend too."

Steve laughed, shaking his head.

"Goodbye," Nancy said, walking backwards, waving to them. "I'll see you both soon."

"See you!" Steve called out. Billy waved.

She smiled wide and turned around, walking across the parking lot and getting into the passenger seat of her Mom's car. The headlights winked on and it pulled out of the parking lot, headed toward the suburbs. Steve stood in the half-empty midday lot, the last of the warm summer breezes drifting over him. He looked sidelong at Billy.

"Guess it's just the two of us, huh?" Steve said.

"Seems like it," Billy said, bringing his zippo to the cigarette hanging off his lips. He smirked a little and nudged Steve. "Could be worse. I could be stuck here with Hagen instead of you."

"Thanks," Steve snorted. "I'm glad I'm an upgrade to Tommy H."

“Mmm, not a huge upgrade,” Billy grinned, pulling the cigarette from his lips. “But, y’know... An upgrade all the same.”

“I miss Robin and Nancy already,” Steve said, shaking his head, grinning. “Come on. Let’s get outta here...”

“Bye!” Billy called, waving to Steve as he walked down the back steps. He closed the door, yawning. He and Steve hadn’t done much after Robin, Harley, and Nancy left, but he was tired anyway. Saying goodbye to people he cared about was a difficult business, but at least this time he knew these people would actually give a shit enough to call him. When he’d left Cynthia King and his other friends back in L.A., he’d known in his heart that they would never talk again— and he’d been right. This time, he had real friends, and no amount of distance would change that. He pulled off his boots with his toes, rolling his shoulders.

“Hi, Billy,” Susan said distractedly, coming into the kitchen, the sound of shuffling papers in her hands.

“Hey,” he greeted, picking up his boots and walking across the kitchen.

“Oh— Billy? There’s a letter for you,” Susan called to him, sounding a little confused.

“Oh, is it from El?”

“No... It’s from the Department of Energy?”

Billy felt his blood run cold but couldn’t understand why... The name sounded familiar...

The government. The Hawkins lab.

The Upside Down.

He stopped dead in the kitchen doorway and turned around, trying to school his expression into something other than dread. Just then, Max came into the back door, the sound of her skateboard wheels clunking against the linoleum floor as she bent down to undo her

shoes.

“Hey, Mom, hey Billy,” she greeted calmly. She paused.

“What‘s going on?” she demanded, concerned.

“Oh— I got a letter. From... The Department of Energy,” Billy said, swallowing.

“Oh... *Oh* ,” Max said, standing up.

“What— What‘s going on?” Susan asked, alarmed.

“Uh...”

“Well...”

Billy closed his eyes and shook his head. All those years, both of them perfecting their skills at white lies, and it had to fail them both now?

“The— The Department of Energy is the one handling all the people who got hurt by the Starcourt Mall,” Max explained quickly, coming over to the kitchen table. Billy walked over too, feeling his hands along the counter.

“Oh,” Susan said, not sounding wholly convinced. “That’s odd, I thought it was a private company responsible for that...”

“It was, but it was funded by the government, I think,” Billy said, shrugging, trying to play it off.

“Well... Let’s read it, shall we?” Susan said, a hint of suspicion on the edge of her voice. She cleared her throat and began to read.

“William Hargrove

Cherry Oak Drive

Hawkins, Indiana

46082

Mr. William Hargrove,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Department of Energy with regards to the incident at the Starcourt Mall in Hawkins, Indiana on July 4th, 1985.

As per the precedent set in the agreement reached between Joyce Byers vs. the Department of Energy (December 1984), provisions have been made to provide victims of incidents of this nature with financial compensation, medical compensation, and other forms of resources. It has come to our attention that due to this incident, you are experiencing visual impairment and physical discomfort.

The Department of Energy has scheduled an appointment with Dr. Samuel Owens, an expert in his field, at the Indiana University Health Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis, Indiana, on the 10th of September, 1986 for a consultation.

To confirm this appointment, please contact the Department directly at 1 (211) 619 - 9454, ext.152314.

Yours,

Colonel John Morton

Department of Energy

Washington, D.C.

20301."

Billy's lips parted.

"This is... Sort of vague, don't you think?" Susan asked, flicking the letter.

"It's the same letter El and Mrs. Byers got," Max explained, though Billy had a feeling that no letter had ever graced the Byers' mailbox.

"And... Why is the *army* involved in this?"

"The mall was selling things to the Russians," Billy said, shrugging.

"What?" Susan exclaimed, laughing in disbelief. "That can't be right..."

“It’s true!” Max said. “I mean… You can give Mrs. Byers a call— She’s been through all this and she can tell you what’s up.”

“Well— No… I suppose… I suppose I was a little distracted last year…”

She cleared her throat.

“What do you think, Billy?” Susan asked, putting a hand on his shoulder.

He swallowed hard.

He had no idea.

August 30th, 1986

Billy stood on the diving board, his toes curling over the edge. The board wobbled a little, but his balance was steady.

“How deep is it?” he called to Steve, who was lying down on a lounge chair nearby.

“Uh, ten feet at that end.”

Billy closed his eyes, leaned forward and dove.

He slid through the water seamlessly, arching his back paddling underneath the surface of the pool, and coming back up. He swam forward tentatively, and found the opposite edge of the pool. He spun and kicked off of the side, swimming a backstroke, counting how many strokes it took for his hand to brush the other end of the pool.

Six.

He dove underwear again.

The water was cool. His hair billowed out behind him. He felt weightless… Peaceful. It certainly was nothing compared to the ocean, with its tiny size and the cloying smell of chlorine… But at least it was water. He counted six, extending his hand and swam up

to the surface, breaking through and tossing his hair back, leaning his elbows on the concrete edge of the pool. His feet could touch the bottom at this end. He put his head on his hands, enjoying the bobbing water, his eyes closed.

“You want a beer?” Steve asked him, his voice close. Billy lifted his head.

“Yeah, gimme,” he said.

He heard Steve pulling the tab, and he tapped his arm with the cold surface of the can. Billy took it from him, raising it slightly.

“Cheers,” he said. He drank.

He heard Steve’s feet splash into the water as he sat beside him.

“How come Nancy never wanted to come over here and swim?” Billy asked curiously.

“Mm...,” Steve sighed, taking a sip of beer. “This pool kinda brings back bad memories for her. It’s tied into how Barb died, I guess.”

Steve took a long drink.

“We were all out here, me and her, Tommy H and Carole, and Barb... And I was goading Nancy into shotgunning a beer, and she did it, and it sorta caused this fight between her and Barb, so she left, and... Well. That was the last time we saw her. The Upside Down got her.”

“The thing... Like the one that got me?” Billy asked, licking his lips.

“No,” Steve said. “Something else... Like an animal. The kids called it a Demogorgan. They called the smaller versions Demodogs. Those were the things I was fighting when you showed up at the Byers looking for Max...”

He chuckled.

“Actually, there was one in the Byers’ fucking fridge when you were there,” he snorted. “Dustin convinced me to put it in there because he wanted to be the first to have a scientific discovery or somethin’... I

dunno, he's a crazy kid."

Billy listened to all this, sipping his beer, the hot sun shining warmly onto his shoulders. Even so, a shiver ran down his spine. He had felt something very, very wrong about the Byers' house that night, but afterward he had been too cowardly to spend time thinking about it. He was amazed at the speed with which everyone in Hawkins resumed their normal lives after the incident in the Starcourt Mall. It was as though things kept occurring which were far too otherworldly to comprehend, so the people in Hawkins simply... Chose not to. Their minds couldn't fathom it, so they didn't bother trying. He had done the same, back then, waking up alone in the Byers' entryway, the smell of decay in his nose.

"I wish I could see the sun," Billy said, the confession coming out of him suddenly, like a hiccup he had been unable to stop. He took a hearty swig of his beer to try and hide what he'd said under an air of casualty, but he knew it was pointless. Steve was Steve. He always caught on.

"Yeah," Steve sighed. He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder, patting him. "I know."

"It's just this... Goddamn darkness," Billy continued, letting out a frustrated sigh. "It's like that... Thing in my head never left. I dunno... I spent a lot of time in places that weren't real when it had me, and I keep feelin' like... Like maybe all this isn't real too, y'know?"

Billy shrugged, downing his beer, leaning his head on his arm, his head turned toward Steve.

Suddenly, Steve punched his arm. *Hard* .

"Ow!" he howled angrily, grabbing his arm. "What the fuck?!"

"It's real," Steve snorted.

"Dickhead," Billy muttered, rubbing his arm, a small smile working onto his lips despite himself.

"I mean, let's face it... If this was a fantasy your brain made up to make you feel happy while a disgusting demon used your body, then

why would *I* be here?" Steve snorted, laughing. "If that was the case, then this pool'd totally be filled with naked chicks."

Billy threw his empty beer can onto the pool deck, tongue tied. While a pool full of hot chicks would be a pretty sweet fantasy world to live in, he kept it to himself that Steve sitting there having a beer with him in the sunshine, just the two of them, wasn't totally out of the realm of happy places he might conjure up in a moment of stress… But Steve didn't need to know that.

"Oh, by the way, I've been meaning to tell you," Steve said as he stood up, his feet splashing as they lifted from the water. "Your tattoo is dumb as shit."

He heard Steve walk over to the cooler and rummage through it.

"What, you don't like it?" Billy called, smirking.

"It's just so fuckin' trashy," Steve laughed, coming back over, his feet slapping wetly on the cement. He pulled a tab and set a can down in front of Billy.

"Here," Steve offered, and Billy felt a cigarette poke into his lips. He lifted a hand, taking it. Steve flicked his lighter, and he inhaled.

"God, these are baby smokes," Billy said, exhaling through his nose. "There ain't nothin' to 'em."

He heard Steve light one, taking a big drag.

"Shut up," Steve yawned, settling back down onto the pool deck and splashing his feet in the water. "You're such a complainer."

"Yeah, yeah," Billy said, waving. They shared a companionable silence for a few minutes, the hot September sun beating down on them.

"So," Steve said eventually. "What're you gonna do about that letter? Have you called them?"

Billy pulled the cigarette from his lips, holding it in his fingers, scratching his chin with his thumb.

“No,” he said slowly.

“You... Don’t want to?” Steve prompted.

“I dunno...”

The truth was that Billy was terrified to call. He had no idea what to expect or who to trust. The government and politics in general had always been this overarching, invisible thing that floated above him, always there but inconsequential to the beatings and fighting going on in his broken house. He knew Harley was political, and he knew enough about the state of things to be pissed at Reagan on behalf of her, himself, and every person who wasn’t straight in America, but... That was about it. The sinewy dark tendons of bureaucracy reached far deeper than he had ever anticipated, and Eleven was proof. It creeped him out, and he didn’t know if this offer was genuine or if it was a way to hurt him even more.

“You don’t trust them,” Steve deduced after Billy’s long silence.

“Do you?” Billy demanded derisively. “I mean— Come on. Secret labs... Not realizing Russians were right under their nose... Eleven...”

“No, I don’t fucking trust them. Not at all,” Steve snorted.

“Well then— How am I supposed to know if this is genuine, or if this is just to get me out there to make me... Disappear or somethin’?”

“Because that didn’t work out for them last time,” Steve said flatly. “Nancy and Jonathan exposed them. They’d be stupid to try it again, especially with so many victims this time. They can’t contain it anymore with fear, so they have to do it by keeping everyone happy.”

“So... You’re sayin’ I got the leverage in the situation,?” Billy asked, unsure.

“Yes,” Steve said firmly, slapping Billy on the back. “You got all the chips. Honestly? I’m a little amazed the bill from your hospital stay wasn’t magically wiped clean. I’m surprised they even had the balls to send you one...”

“Well... Since they seem to know a lot, they might’ve known I probably wouldn’t fight back,” Billy said, making a face, leaning his cheek against his arm on the pool deck. “Dad would’ve sued if he had any money, but that would’ve been for him more than anything...”

“Yeah... He seemed kind of a miser…”

“Yup. He hated spending money on me and Max, but he spent more on her than me cause it made Susan happy.”

They drank for a while, enjoying the sun that was slowly sinking behind the pine trees behind the wooden fence that lined the backyard.

“Oh— I forgot. Susan’s divorcing Neil,” Billy said, lifting his head. “We can’t afford it, but... She’s gotta. He tried to control a lot of her stuff, her money, her papers... That kinda thing. S’gonna be shit, but... She wants to do it.”

“That’s good to hear,” Steve said. He finished his beer and put the can beside him.

“Listen,” he said. “I think you should at least call them… See what kind of deal they’re offering you. And if you go in to meet them, and you get bad vibes, you can just leave, right?”

“But... That’s what I’m sayin,’ Steve,” Billy said, chewing on his thumbnail. “What if I get there and they... They just *take* me? They make me disappear or... I dunno! I just don’t fuckin’ trust them and they’re the reason all this shit happened in the first place!”

Fear had been a taboo emotion for so long that it had been replaced with anger. Flashes of fury spiked in his gut and he stood up straight, his jaw clenching. He hated all of them so much, and he didn’t even know who they were, what faces he could picture to satisfy his anger. It felt like an endless mass lording above him, dangling his life on a thread, tantalizingly close but just out of reach. The offer was too good to pass up, but the idea of cooperating with them made him sick.

“Billy, listen— Like I said before, you got the leverage in the

situation, and it isn't like you'd be going in alone. I know for a fact that Robin and Harley and Nancy will show up, that Susan and Max will both be there... We won't let them win. They're gonna give you a surgery, they're gonna do it for free, and they're gonna pay your medical bills from last year."

Steve's voice was fierce and sure. He put a hand on Billy's shoulder and squeezed.

"I *promise* ," Steve said. "You'll get what they owe you."

Billy bit his lip, his nostrils flaring. He knew there was no way in hell he could have ever done something like this on his own. In fact, if he'd been alone, like he'd been before... He probably would have ignored the letter. He was strong enough now to admit that he would have been too terrified to bother, and had grown comfortable enough now to acknowledge that he was scared. *Really* fucking scared. Despite all of this, though, he knew Steve would be there, that Susan and Max would be there... And if Steve's determined voice was anything to go by, so would Mrs. Byers and Eleven. His gut reaction was to shrug them all off, to make it so that it wasn't a big deal, that this was something he could do on his own... But he found he didn't want to do it on his own. All his life, with very few exceptions, being alone had been the most painless way of living, and so he'd gotten used to it. He'd had to. But now, after his friends, his sister, and his stepmother had stayed by his side through the hardest year of his life... He felt very differently. They wanted to fight for him, and he wanted to fight for them.

"Okay," Billy said, trying to sound more determined than he felt. "You're right."

September 10th, 1986

"There we go!" Joyce Byers said, satisfied, putting down a hot pot of chicken toast down on the dining room table, pulling the pot cloths away and setting them down beside her plate, "go ahead! Dig in!"

Billy lifted his fork and knife, a little uncomfortable, and began to eat. It wasn't that Joyce or her family made him uncomfortable— he

was just always uncomfortable in dinner situations at other families' houses. He had been dreading the day Steve's mom finally asked him to stay for supper, but he'd managed to somehow avoid it so far. He knew he had impeccable table manners; it was something he'd learned quietly by himself so that he could fit in, could weasel his way into spaces that thought they were better than him.

The amount of poking, prodding, blood work, brain scans, and countless other tests that he'd gone through earlier that day had exhausted him. Dr. Owens had asked him a lot of questions, some of them uncomfortably intrusive, and it had all given him the feeling like he was crazy, like he was this fragile thing that was gonna break down if they didn't treat him with kid gloves. Lying there, in a clinical room, smelling antiseptic and uncomfortable in the papery gown they'd given him, his head hooked up by wires to a machine… It hadn't made him feel very hopeful about his chances for recovery. He looked down at his potatoes, chewing slowly, blocking out the conversations around him. He wasn't in the mood to talk.

"Thank you again for having us over, Mrs. Byers," Susan said politely. She was also unused to kindness from strangers, like he was. She hadn't had many friends back in L.A., and in Hawkins Billy was pretty sure she had none. That had been Neil's plan all along, of course. If they were cut off, then he could control them better.

"Oh, call me Joyce," Joyce said, her voice bright and casual. "El told me all about it and since we went through it, I wasn't gonna let you guys handle those bastards alone."

Billy took a bite of his chicken and couldn't help but smirk a little. He liked Joyce Byers, from the very brief few moments he'd interacted with her. She was unbelievably intelligent and brave, and she sort of reminded him of Max.

"Well— Thank you, Joyce," Susan said, laughing a little. She seemed uncomfortable but touched by the other woman's kindness.

The table naturally devolved into three separate conversations. Joyce and Susan chatted, while Will, Max, and El shared gossip. At the other end, Jonathan, Steve, and Billy sat in relative silence. Billy ate and said nothing. He knew there was old beef between Jonathan and

Steve. He was pretty sure there wasn't any hostility left there, but still...

"Hey, um... Nancy. How is she?" Jonathan asked nervously.

"Good. She's at Indiana State now, actually..."

"Right..."

An awkward pause. Billy chewed his potatoes.

"Um, Steve... Do you think... Do you think Nancy might—"

"She's definitely still in love with you, man, you should just call her," Steve said, snorting lightly.

"I— Yeah. Thanks."

"No problem."

Billy swallowed. The potatoes were really good.

"Have— Have we met before?" Jonathan asked.

Billy lifted his head. "Billy Hargrove."

"Billy... Hargrove," Jonathan repeated. Most people in their year at Hawkins High had heard of him. He could tell Jonathan was baffled.

"Didn't... Didn't you kick Steve's ass?"

Billy barked with laughter, almost spitting out his food. Beside him, Steve cackled, caught off guard.

"Yeah," chuckled Steve. "You guys have that in common."

Billy scratched his head. He was sitting on the Byers' sofa, chewing absentmindedly on his lip. He was trying to tamp down his nerves, but they were going haywire, the endless medical tests he'd gone through preying on his mind. Dealing with all this on his own was one thing, but having a group of doctors looking him over all at once

made him feel exposed, and like he was sicker or more broken than he actually was. He knew it was just his own paranoia and the knowledge that these were the people who'd fucked things up in the first place, but… He just couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. After the initial awkwardness, Jonathan and Steve had fallen into friendly conversation, sitting on either side of him and catching each other up on what had been going on since they'd left Hawkins. He tried to focus on their words, tried to participate, but he couldn't. His mind felt like a bowl of popcorn kernels over high heat, anxiety popping and exploding in his head. He startled a little as they got up, still talking.

"You want a beer Billy?" Steve called to him.

"Uh, yeah," he called back, letting his hand fall from his lips.

Then he was left alone in the living room. Susan and Joyce were chatting in the kitchen, and Max and Eleven were hanging out with Will somewhere. The unfamiliar room felt very alone, even though he could hear voices filtering into the room from all around. After a while, he heard light footprints on the floor, then, someone sat down on the couch.

"H—Hi."

It was Will.

Billy inclined his head. "Hey." He swallowed.

"Um… Can I talk to you?"

Billy blinked. His mind raced for a moment, trying to think of why Will Byers wanted to talk to him of all people, and then he finally realized.

The Mind Flayer.

Billy didn't exactly want to actually talk about that thing, but… Will was the only person who could actually feasibly understand what he was going through.

"Yeah. I want a smoke," he said. "You got a porch or somethin'?"

Will led him out onto the back deck, and sat them both down on the short steps that lead out into the grass. The ambient noise of the city running in the background hummed and he half listened to it as he took out a smoke and lit it.

“You want one?” he asked Will.

“Oh— No thanks,” Will said, a little amused laugh in his voice. “I don’t smoke.”

“Good answer,” Billy said, taking a long drag.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Billy smoking.

“I— I wanted to talk to you, but... I actually don’t know what I want to say,” Will said uncomfortably. “I just… I don’t know.”

Billy shrugged. “Honestly? Sometimes I forget I’m not the only one,” he said, gesturing vaguely with his smoke. “It feels kinda good to be around someone who gets it who also don’t think I caused it.”

Billy laid his elbows across his knees, his head bent.

“I— I caused it,” Will said, his voice small.

“Horse shit. You didn’t cause anything,” Billy said, reaching an elbow out and gently tapping Will’s arm with it. “Eleven didn’t cause it either. The government did. They fucked it up. And now, they’re gonna fuckin’ fix it.”

“You don’t blame me?” Will asked, his voice constricted.

“No,” Billy said. “I don’t.”

A few moments passed. He could hear Will sniffing quietly. He couldn’t imagine how Eleven and Will felt, being so kind and so sweet, and living with the fact that their actions had inadvertently caused pain and suffering to others. Billy had been doing that before the Mind Flayer had got to him, so he couldn’t imagine what Will might feel, who was so quiet and so tender, and didn’t seem to have a violent bone in his body.

“I think it’s kinda weird that it got us, and we have the same name,” Will said, laughing lightly.

“Yeah,” Billy smirked. He hadn’t realized that before. “If you’re not named William, that Mind Flayer thing don’t want you.”

Will chuckled softly. Billy reached out and put a hand on his shoulder, and smoked in silence. Beside him, Will was quiet. They didn’t need to really say anything. Sitting beside someone who knew what it felt like to go through what they had endured was enough.

September 15th, 1986

After a dizzying array of clearance checks and awkward waits while phone calls were made by statuesque desk clerks, Billy, Susan, Max, and Steve were ushered into the fifth floor of a wing of the Indiana University Methodist Hospital that seemed completely deserted, save for a final desk clerk whose dry voice sifted like sand across her lips as she instructed them to sit in the waiting area in the next room. Waiting for them there was a surprise; the entire Byers family, Eleven, Robin, Harley, and Nancy were already waiting for them.

“Oh, it’s good to see you,” Harley said, coming over and giving Billy a hug, who returned it nervously, the sleeve of his denim jacket catching and falling down over his hand. After a few moments, they let go and he went to fixing his sleeve, his head bent, his gut feeling like he’d hurl at any moment. Nancy and Robin came over, and hugged him too, but he felt like he couldn’t breathe very well and gently pushed them away. Steve led him over to a row of chairs and sat him in it. He heard Susan talking to Joyce, Max gleefully running over to Eleven and Will. Robin took his hand.

“How are you?” she asked sympathetically.

He shrugged, not trusting his voice. He hadn’t slept well at all the night before, tossing and turning on the motel bed. He felt exhausted and just wanted to get it over with.

“That was nice for you guys to come,” Nancy said to Jonathan, who must have been standing nearby. Billy hadn’t had a lot of time to talk

to him, but he liked him well enough— He seemed like a sweet guy who actually had a lot of the same tastes that he had. In another world, where his only parent had been a kind one, he might've ended up more like Jonathan.

"No worries— You know Mom. No way she'd let you fight this thing alone," Jonathan said kindly.

Just then, a door opened.

"We're ready for you, Mr. Hargrove."

Billy let out a small breath and stood. Susan stood up too, walking over to Billy and putting her hand on his arm.

"I'll go in with you," she said. Her voice brooked no argument. Billy nodded. She led him to the door, but Billy stopped. He licked his lips.

"Steve— Steve, could you—?"

Steve leapt out of his chair, striding over to Billy's side.

"Yes," he said, his voice a little hoarse, "of course."

"I need you to sign some forms, Mrs. Hargrove—"

"Miss Mayfield," Susan corrected him.

"My apologies, Miss Mayfield...," said Dr. Owens. "I'll just have a little chat with Billy about the results and Miss Longmire over there will help you sign some paperwork so that this visit is paid for by our good friend Uncle Sam."

"Oh—" Susan said, standing up uncertainly. "Of course..."

She put a hand on Billy's shoulder. "Are you sure you'll be okay?" she asked him quietly. He felt a leap of affection for her and nodded.

"Yeah, I'll be okay. He's just gonna get into the gross details... You don't gotta listen."

“Okay...”

He listened as Susan’s heels clicked toward the door and left.

After a few moments, Dr. Owens spoke up.

“Does she know?”

“No,” Billy said. “She thinks this is because of a class action lawsuit or somethin.’”

“Good,” Dr. Owens nodded. He turned in his chair, the wheels creaking.

“Well— The results from the tests show that your body is functioning almost normally now.”

“Almost?” Billy demanded.

Dr. Owens sighed.

“Well, when I reviewed the toxicology reports they ran last year— Well. Quite frankly, you shouldn’t be alive. At that time, your blood was essentially poison. We think that the creature, this—“

“Mind Flayer,” Steve offered helpfully.

“Yes, this uh... this *Mind Flayer* needed certain chemicals to have a hospitable environment for it to live. Just based on that, we didn’t expect you to live, but it almost seemed like the bodies of those affected treated the chemicals in the system like a virus... Based on that, we were able to develop a kind of antibody, a vaccine... When we used it on the survivors who had been under the creature’s influence the least amount of time, any side effects of being infected seemed to slowly dissipate over the course of a month or two.”

“You’ve had this for that long and you didn’t say anything to me?” Billy growled, crossing his arms.

“We didn’t know if it would work on you,” Dr. Owens said, raising his eyebrows. “When we compared your data to the data of the other survivors, there was something totally different in the way that this

Mind Flayer was using your body...”

Dr. Owens stood up, walking across the room and pushing a few buttons. Billy heard a kettle turn on.

“See...,” he continued. “That creature was sort of like, uh... A king, in a game of chess. It sent pieces of itself out into the world, infecting living things, and then used them to infect other things. As you know, this Mind Flayer was able to control whatever it infected, but we think when it took control of young Will Byers, at the time it had no idea how to work a human body, or how living things in our side of the dimensions actually worked. When it finally left Will, it disappeared somewhere to... Lick its wounds, we’ll say.”

Dr. Owens got out three mugs, plunking them down on a table.

“Now, from Miss Wheeler’s reports, we were able to see that it started small— rats, mice, that kind of thing. These rodents eventually bit Mrs. Driscoll, infecting a human being, but what it really needed in order to take control of the world that it was stuck in was a host that was healthy like Will but stronger than an old lady or some unfortunate wild animals. When it found you, Mr. Hargrove… It got what it was looking for.”

Billy’s hands were freezing cold as he gripped the sides of the plastic chair.

“Now, because of your age and your health, you became something of a primary conduit for the Mind Flayer. It chose to act primarily through you. You’ll notice that it was willing to sacrifice others— poor Tom Holloway at the Hawkins Post, for example— but it kept you out of danger after your fight with Miss Hopper, and only commanded you to fight her once it had no other choice. In a lot of ways, the others were like the pawns, and knights and bishops in a game of chess, and you were the queen piece which protected itself, the king. It didn’t want to sacrifice you, because you were its most powerful piece.”

Billy clenched his jaw, and gripped the sides of the plastic chair so hard it creaked. He knew that Dr. Owens was doing something kind by explaining what had actually happened to him, unlike the rest of

the world which had tried to keep it a secret... But he almost didn't want to know.

"You see, boys," Dr. Owens said, clicking off the boiling kettle and pouring water into three mugs. "We think that it actually kept a piece of itself within you, like a seed, that it could activate when it needed. Now, when the gate to the Upside Down was closed, I believe that it died, and so did the part of itself that it had placed within you. The problem is that the piece has nowhere to go. It's... It's acting like a virus, like a disease. This was the same for the other victims, but their exposure (as it were) was less than yours. I think that this, combined with the sheer amount of chemicals that the creature made you consume, probably caused a lot of the discomfort you've been feeling and certainly your blindness."

He paused, taking the mugs over to his desk, setting two down in front of them and sitting back down in his chair. He took a moment to blow quietly on his drink.

"Now, this is just a theory... But, ironically, I actually think whatever piece of the Mind Flayer is still kicking around inside you is actually responsible for the fact that you're still alive. The blood work we did today shows that your levels are actually almost all back to normal, it just seems like it's manifesting in very specific places, such as around your retinal nerves, and in your chest, near your heart..."

"So— So if you take it out, do I—?"

"Oh, no. No. You won't die. I promise," Dr. Owens said hastily, leaning back in his chair. "That's the good news. The bad news here is that the presence of this... Virus, we'll say, is that it's attached itself to parts of your body that it needed to control you. The longer this virus stays, the more possibility there is for scar tissue to form and other complications to arise."

Billy leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms moodily. *Won't die, my ass...*

"What I'm proposing is a complicated surgery, but one that I think you should have for your quality of life. It'll give you the best chance at being healthy in the future. Because it's so involved with your

heart, you'll definitely be at higher risk for heart-related diseases, injuries, heart attacks... But if we can get in as soon as possible and get rid of the scar tissue that's forming, your chance to develop those things later in life will be cut in half."

Billy swallowed a little and leaned forward in his chair. He ignored the tea that he smelled wafting before him on the desk. He put his elbows on his knees, bending his head, wiping his face with his palm. He knew it was the right call, but... It really did seem too good to be true...

"What's the catch?" Billy asked, turning his head a little to the left, toward Steve, who was very quiet.

Dr. Owens let out a derisive, frustrated snort. Billy's eyebrows furrowed. So far he had been a relatively affable man— and Joyce Byers trusted him. This change in demeanour startled him.

"Hm. Yes...," he said, letting out a heavy sigh, "you'll notice that your letter came from a certain General Morton from the Department of Energy. The only reason that man isn't in the room with us right now is because I wanted to at least try a farce of patient confidentiality... But maybe he should tell you the stakes himself..."

Billy's gut flipped as Dr. Owens rose from his seat and walked over to the office door, opening it.

"You can come in now."

He listened in tense confusion as Susan came back into the room, followed by a gruff sounding man that Billy didn't recognize. There was a lot of movement and the shuffling of papers and suddenly he was being read a document that was so backwards and full of subsections and clauses that he had no idea what they were talking about. Only when the words *'mandatory service'* entered his ears did he perk up, alarmed.

"Mandatory what now?" he demanded.

"Well, son— You're an asset to the U.S. in this Cold War— You've seen their equipment, you know what this creature thing's done... If

we're going to be paying for all of this, we need to get something in return."

Billy blinked, his mouth parting in amazement. Colonel Morton and the rest of the U.S. army had no idea what had actually happened. He hadn't seen any Russian facilities, and the relationship he'd shared with the Mind Flayer had been distinctly one-sided. Was this man really so confused as to what had happened on July fourth last year?

"Stop," Billy said, holding up his hand. "All this shit... It's confusing. Can I take a moment, or— Get someone to look it over?"

"Well, come now, son," General Morton chuckled in a facsimile of kindness. "It's nothing too special. Just a couple years service with me and my men and you'll be back home in no time."

"I—"

He turned a little to Steve, who put a hand on his thigh.

"Nancy," they both said in unison.

Billy, Steve, and Susan burst out of the consultation room, led by Nancy, who was clutching a thick document in her hands, her face set in an expression of disgust. Trailing behind them was Colonel Morton, looking murderous, and Dr. Owens, who looked exhausted. The crowd in the waiting room jumped in surprise.

"You mean to tell me you're just gonna walk away, son? Blind?" Colonel Morton shouted, his face beet red.

"That's right," Billy ground out, upset and furious. Steve was holding his hand, leading him, his jaw clenched. Susan was stony faced. Nancy spun around, brandishing the thick document at Colonel Morton like a sword.

"This contract is unacceptable!" Nancy hissed, poking Morton in the chest with the thick stack of papers. "It's inhumane!"

“What’s inhumane?” Joyce Byers piped up, coming over to them, her eyebrows raised. Morton stopped dead in his tracks, eyeing Joyce Byers like he was seeing an unpleasant and particularly vengeful ghost.

“Ah— Mrs. Byers, how are you?” Colonel Morton greeted, trying for a pleasant tone, but his voice ended up somewhere between *go die* and *kill yourself*.

“I’m quite well, thank you, and so are all my family,” she said curtly. Steve watched, amused, as Colonel Morton’s eyes flicked across the room at the crowd waiting for them, landing finally on Eleven.

She glared at him, her head dipping, looking up at Morton from beneath her furrowed eyebrows. Steve swallowed. That was Eleven’s *Look* , the Look she gave when she was about to bend reality to her will. Steve had enough respect for her powers to know that Morton should start stepping lightly, and quick.

Colonel Morton stared between Joyce, Will, Max, Nancy, and Susan’s furious faces, the annoyed and concerned looks of all Billy’s friends, and finally back to Eleven. Steve watched as she tilted her head ever so slightly. He heard the sound of metal grinding from above them. He looked up.

Above Morton’s head, there were a set of long fluorescent lights set into the ceiling, standard in any public building across the country. They creaked oddly, as though the filaments were expanding, too big to be contained by the glass that surrounded them. As they creaked, the light began to flush, getting brighter, brighter, brighter... Colonel Morton looked up, visibly swallowing. He looked back down at Eleven.

“Well— I’m sure we can figure something out,” he said hastily. “If I knew you’d feel so strongly, I wouldn’t have suggested it...”

The light dimmed back to normal, and Eleven gave them a satisfied smile, surreptitiously wiping her thumb under her nose.

“Is something wrong with the light?” Susan asked, confused.

“Oh, this room needs to be renovated,” Dr. Owens sighed, smiling gently and taking Susan by the arm, leading her back into his office down the hall. “It’s always doing that...”

Morton gave Eleven a very dirty look before he spun on his heel and followed them, leaving Billy and Steve alone with the rest of the crowd.

“Thanks,” Billy said, smirking widely, his eyes crinkling. “That’s two I owe you, El.”

Billy felt the fall chill more keenly now, though it was only mid-September. Autumn had blown in gently at first and then all at once, blustering across the flat fields and brush forests of Indiana, whistling through the yellowing reeds in the roadsides. Steve leaned beside him, sharing his cigarette. Billy passed it to him, and he took it. They had all decided on a late lunch break, and the rest of their crowd was lining up inside an A&W a few meters away.

“We don’t gotta stay out here if you’re cold, Billy,” Steve said reasonably.

“No... I mean, it’s okay...”

“Too many people?” Steve asked, inhaling.

“No, not that just... I dunno.”

Billy felt like his head was buzzing, a million different fears, concerns, and hopes vying for his attention. His meeting with Dr. Owens and Colonel Morton had gone about as well as he could have hoped. Nancy, with the help of Eleven’s threats, had managed to negotiate full payment for his medical bills from the year before, as well as any medical bills resulting from this surgery. He also didn’t have to gossip to the United States Army about secrets he didn’t have — Which for him, was the most important part about any of it. He wasn’t telling them *shit* . Everyone in the room kept tight lips about the fact that it was actually Robin and Steve who had been inside the facility under the Starcourt Mall— and Billy wasn’t about to rat them out. Colonel Morton could rot for all he cared.

He had a perfect chance, an easy solution, right in front of him on a silver platter... And yet, he didn't know if he actually wanted it.

"Hey...," Steve said quietly, shuffling over. Billy lifted his head, alarmed, as he slid his hand behind them on the slick hood of the car, catching his fingers and holding onto them. Billy instinctively turned his head, listening for anyone who might see. Steve, on the other hand, didn't really seem to care. He'd never had to be cautious, not like Billy had.

"Something's buggin' you," Steve said softly. Billy turned his head in Steve's direction, closing his eyes.

"You're gonna think I'm stupid," he snorted lightly, his fingers claiming the cigarette Steve tapped on his knuckles. He expected Steve to fire back something about him already knowing that, but he didn't.

"No I won't," Steve said, sincerely, and Billy believed him.

"I don't know...," Billy began, taking a drag of the cigarette and blowing smoke up into his bangs. "I guess... I just got used to being like this. Blind, y'know? And now I'm... I guess I'm... Afraid. It's stupid... I know..."

"I mean... I don't think it's stupid...," Steve said, turning to his side and facing Billy, half sitting on the hood. "You being blind... It's a part of who you are now, you know? There isn't anything wrong with it..."

"I guess I just feel like other people think there's somethin' wrong with it, you know? Like... Oh, poor Billy... But..."

Billy swallowed and smiled a little.

"I've had the worst and best year of my life this year, half of it in pain, all of it blind, and... I dunno. I— I guess I… Kinda *like* the person I am now, you know? I'm just... What if everything changes?"

Billy knew his cheeks were flushed red. He had never said that he liked himself to someone, and it felt awkward, like he was putting himself in a very uncomfortable spotlight. He passed Steve the

cigarette, and he took it, chuckling.

“Billy, everything changes,” he said softly. “Everything will always change. Whether or not you get this surgery, life will still happen.”

Billy bit his thumbnail absentmindedly. He was afraid of the future, plain and simple. Everything was getting complicated. His health, his place in his step mother and step sister’s life, the death of his own mother, his relationship with Steve... It was all so much harder now, and yet, so much more rewarding.

“If you think that staying the way you are right now is the right choice for you, there’s nothing wrong with that,” Steve said gently, leaning in. “No matter what you choose, I promise we’ll all still love you.”

Billy’s heart skipped like a scratched record, and he closed his eyes, Steve‘s words repeating in his brain.

Love you, love you, love you...

Max shoved the last of her fries into her mouth and licked her lips, grabbing her drink and putting the straw in her mouth. Across from her, El was biting voraciously into a hamburger, a bit of ketchup and mustard falling down her chin. She laughed, her mouth full, and put her burger back down on her tray, chewing dramatically, trying to get it down. Max giggled.

“S’too big,” Eleven managed, grabbing a napkin and wiping her chin. She’d never learned table manners and that was one of Max’s favourite things about her. She ate like she enjoyed it, instead of the usual way of eating that came from getting yelled at by your Mom your entire life to eat like a lady. She looked over to the counter and saw her Mom talking to Joyce, still waiting for their food with Will, Jonathan, and Billy’s friends.

Max looked out the window. Nearby, Steve and Billy were sharing a cigarette, talking, leaning on the front of Billy’s car. Eleven swallowed loudly and took a slurp of her drink. El caught her eye and tapped her finger against the window, pointing at Billy and Steve.

“Happy screams,” she grinned, knowingly.

Max choked on her Diet Coke. “Wh— What!” she sputtered.

Eleven gave her a confused look, still smiling. She flicked her finger between Billy and Steve.

“Billy and Steve... Happy screams?”

“Wh—no! No, my brother doesn’t *‘happy screams’* —“

“Ever?” Eleven asked, her eyebrows shooting to her hairline, concerned.

“No, no! *Ugh* . Yes, Billy does... Happy screams...,” Max grimaced, shaking her head. “But... Not with Steve!”

Eleven’s eyebrows furrowed. “Why not happy screams with Steve?”

“It’s just... He’s... They’re both...”

How did you explain that people were mean to you if you were like that?

“Love,” El insisted quietly, looking at them.

Max looked over at them and her mouth parted, the words she had been gearing up to say dying on her lips. The parking lot around Billy and Steve was deserted. Billy was talking, his mouth moving. Steve had his head bent, listening. He put a hand on Billy’s shoulder. Their faces were so close. She couldn’t see Billy’s expression very well from here, but... His shoulders were relaxed, his whole body turned to Steve, like a flower facing the sun. Billy had gotten softer this year, more open, more kind...

Ever since Steve had come into his life, he had seemed to lighten, like a great and terrible burden he’d been carrying had finally been lifted.

“Love,” she repeated softly, under her breath.

Eleven smiled at them. “Love,” she agreed.

September 16th, 1986

Steve looked down at Billy and bit his lip. He was lying on a gurney, having been tucked in by a nurse, wearing one of those horribly thin gown things that hospitals seemed to love dressing their patients in. Billy looked nervous, but was hiding it well— Probably for Max's sake, who looked so worked up she was almost angry, staring intensely into Billy's face as if to memorize it.

"Oh— Steve," Billy said suddenly, taking his hands up to his right ear. He unfastened the crystal stud Steve had given him and held it out. Steve took it gently, holding it in his palm.

"I don't trust them not to somehow lose that," Billy snorted.

"And you trust me?" Steve chuckled, trying to lighten the mood.

"You paid for it, so...," Billy said, smirking a little.

Steve slid the crystal stud into the deep front pocket of his jeans. He wouldn't lose it.

A few quiet moments passed.

"Guess it's time..." Billy muttered.

Susan leaned over and put her arm around him, giving him a small kiss on the cheek.

"We're right here," she said, rubbing his shoulder and giving him a tired smile.

"Okay," Billy said, nodding, trying to sound casual. Max leaned forward next, throwing her arms around him and burying her face into his chest. She mumbled something about good luck, before she extracted herself and stood back, red in the face.

Steve, on the other side of the cot, put his hand on his hip, his other hand rubbing his lips nervously.

"See ya on the other side," he said, trying to sound confident. He was

wildly nervous, but that wasn't the energy you brought to someone going through experimental secret government surgery.

"Alright," Billy said, swallowing a little louder than usual. "I gotta go..."

"Okay," Steve said, eventually. He was very reluctant to leave Billy alone with any kind of government official or medical person involved in the Upside Down. Though Dr. Owens had proved himself to be an ally who was genuinely trying to do the right thing, Steve felt that one man embroiled in red tape wasn't necessarily enough of a guiding light for the rest of the shady practices going on around him. Still— He knew this was likely the only chance Billy would ever get, and to have it fully paid for by someone else was far too good of an opportunity to pass up.

Something electric crackled through his veins and he jumped on it, acting too quickly to think.

He leaned down and gave Billy a small peck on the forehead, his lips touching his skin briefly, like his flesh was burning hot. As he straightened up, he caught Max and Susan's eyes as they stared at him, surprised, their eyebrows raised into their foreheads. He ignored them, his cheeks flushing, staring down in agony as Billy's eyes widened in that sweet way he did when he was pleasantly caught off guard. Steve tore his eyes away from enjoying Billy's butterfly lashes fluttering over his cheeks, and nodded gruffly.

"Right," Steve grunted, crossing his arms.

Billy blinked once and was back to his usual calm and arrogant self.

"Right," he nodded back. "I'm gonna go."

"Yup."

"Cool."

A pause.

"Good luck," Steve said, finally.

He turned and strode out of the room. He squeezed his eyes shut as he walked, his cheeks on fire, grimacing. Max and Susan followed behind, two nurses going in the door they had just left. Steve shoved his hands in his pockets, his fingers playing absentmindedly with the crystal earring Billy had given him for safekeeping. As they walked down the hall, Steve leading in front, he could feel the silent stares of Susan and Max boring into the back of his skull.

Steve ate his mashed potatoes slowly. He didn't have much of an appetite. It had been a few hours since Billy had gone in for surgery and it would be a few hours yet until he was done. He felt jittery and nauseous. He looked up at Joyce, who gave him a sympathetic smile as she got up and passed by him to get more juice from the fridge. As she opened the fridge door the phone on the wall rang, and she leaned over and picked it up.

"Hello, Byers residence," she answered, holding the phone between her ear and shoulder as she took out a pitcher of fruit punch from the fridge.

"Oh. Oh," Joyce said, sounding alarmed. She closed the fridge door with her foot and put the pitcher down on the kitchen table, the coiled phone wire bouncing.

"It's… It's for you, Susan," Joyce said, looking concerned. Steve lifted his head, swallowing his potatoes around a lump in his throat, his heart thumping against his chest.

Susan got up quickly from the table and took the phone from Joyce.

"Hello? Yes, this is Susan Mayfield…"

A pause.

"He's— What?" she demanded. "What— What do you mean?"

The kitchen went very silent.

"I don't understand… How could he? Did you not use the anesthetic properly, I—"

Steve stood slowly from the kitchen table, his heart beating faster and faster in his chest the more he heard.

“I don’t understand, how could he have just— Walked out?”

Steve’s eyes widened and he spun, looking right at Eleven. She rose slowly from the table. The kitchen lights hummed and blinked, winking out and then back on again.

At the front of the house, a door slammed open.

They all turned around in amazed horror as Billy walked slowly into the kitchen, his head bent, his hair swaying in his face. His arm was bleeding slowly, looking as though he’d ripped out the IV in his arm, wearing a thin hospital gown. By the wall, Susan gasped in shock and let the phone fall from her fingertips. It clattered against the wallpaper.

“Billy?” she asked, amazed.

“You,” Billy said, his voice echoing strangely, as though it was being broadcast to them through different planes of existence. Above him, the lights in the room were going haywire, blinking, almost recoiling away from him. Billy raised his head. Steve’s entire body went frigid as he saw his face. Billy’s eyes were wide, two dark orbs crawling with darkness. His skin was tinted in grey, a sheen of sweat across his flesh. Across his face and down his neck and arms, black sinewy crawled across the surface of his skin like veins.

The Mind Flayer was still alive.

“You,” Billy said again, his voice echoing, tinged with alien hatred. He walked toward El, who had stood from the table, looking fearful and determined. Joyce stepped between them, shielding her, Will, and Max behind her arm.

“Get back!” she ordered. Steve watched in the corner of his eye as Jonathan slowly slid a blade from the knife block. Beside him, Nancy backed away, her hand reaching into a drawer. Robin and Harley slowly backed away. Steve looked around, and then he saw it, his

weapon of choice: a baseball bat lounging innocently near the front door. He crept back and away, grabbing it, and came walking quietly back into the kitchen, raising it over his head.

“Billy!” Susan called, terrified. She looked up at the lights going haywire above her head then around at them all, noticing they were all brandishing weapons. “What— What is going on—?”

Billy lunged, knocking Joyce away, his hands seeking El’s throat. She threw her hands forward, grabbing the air, and he stopped, grunting. She yelled and pushed him back, slowly, her nose spurting with blood. Steve saw an opportunity and slowly crept up behind Billy, baseball bat poised. He winced, raising the bat.

Sorry, buddy…

“Steve, what are you doing?” Susan yelled. El’s concentration was broken and Billy wrenched himself from it, turning so quickly Steve couldn’t react fast enough, only managing a glancing blow on his shoulder before Billy’s hands wrapped around his neck, snarling, sending them both tumbling down onto the kitchen floor. The baseball bat fell from Steve’s fingertips and he fought to free himself, choking, grabbing onto Billy’s back, hands, arms, kicking his feet… But it was no use. Billy’s grip was like iron. Steve could barely breathe, his struggling slowing as his breath was cut off. He looked up and saw that Billy’s face was almost touching his. Despite the snarl in his lips and the veins crawling across his skin… He was crying, tears streaming down his face.

Billy was still in there. He could *see* him .

Helpless, dying, his breath slowly being cut off from his brain, Steve wanted him to know that he forgave him, that he didn’t blame him. He strained against Billy’s hands, his consciousness flickering, and put his lips to Billy’s snarling mouth. He kissed him.

He felt the hands on his throat still and loosen slightly, enough that he could get breath into his lungs. His eyes slowly flickered back into being, colours popping in the corners of his vision. He closed them and lifted his head more, turning, his kiss working the snarl out of Billy’s lips until they were expressionless and soft again.

Then, there was a heavy clunk, and Billy collapsed bodily against him, his head lolling across his shoulder and onto the floor. He looked up and saw Susan holding the baseball bat, looking terrified and shocked.

"If we make it leave Billy, it'll just come back again!" Joyce protested, gesturing wildly and glaring at Dr. Owens, who had arrived two hours ago with a bruise on his cheek and a kit full of syringes to keep Billy unconscious.

"I know!" Dr. Owens sighed, rubbing his face. "I know. I just don't see how we can kill it without killing Billy…"

"How— How did this happen in the first place?" Susan asked, completely confused but managing to follow along as best as she could. "If this… Thing was killed, why is it inside Billy?"

"It acts like a virus," Dr. Owens explained tiredly. "It's possible that even though the treatment we've been doing worked for the other victims… Since Billy was its primary host, it's possible it kept a piece of itself inside him… We knew that going in, but we thought it was dead, that all his symptoms were just residual… But I guess not."

"How did we not know?" Max demanded, distressed. "There weren't any signs… He was totally normal…"

"No he wasn't…," Steve said quietly.

The loud debate in the room died down, and he felt ten sets of eyes on him.

"What?" Max asked, confused.

"I… He's been… He hasn't been okay, and I didn't say anything… It's my fault," Steve gulped, closing his eyes. "He's been having… Episodes. Nightmares…"

"That's normal," Joyce said, letting out a breath of sympathetic laughter. "Sweetheart, that's not your fault, that's just… Traumatic post…. stuff…"

“Post traumatic stress disorder,” Jonathan interjected quietly.

“Yes, that,” Joyce said, giving him a kind smile.

“No,” Steve croaked, shaking his head, opening his eyes and looking up at her. “No, it’s not… He…”

He licked his lips.

“Once, he was having a nightmare, and… And he could *see* me. The lights flickered, like it does when the Upside Down is there… It… He’s been having dreams… Going to that dark place, where El looks for people…”

El stood up, coming over to him. She knelt in front of him and took his hand.

Steve looked at her searchingly. “He— He said he sees a kid… The kid has short hair, a buzz cut… They’re pale, they have white hair —“

“Pink eyes,” El whispered, her eyes intense, nodding. “Ghost.”

“Ghost,” Steve whispered back.

“It’s Ten,” she told him. “Ten got lost.”

“That’s what Billy said,” Steve nodded, licking his dry lips. “That they were… Lost. Between.”

“What did Ten say?” El asked him.

Steve’s heart plunged into his belly. “They said… That it was still alive. They said… Kill it.”

El blinked and nodded slowly. Behind her, Joyce was leaning against the kitchen table, her mouth set in a hard line, her eyes sad. Dr. Owens sat down heavily, rubbing his forehead.

“I just thought… I wanted to believe they were nightmares, but… I guess they were real. And Billy… He was… He was so scared, I… I didn’t want to…”

Steve hung his head. He felt Max staring at him and couldn't look her in the face. He felt like he'd failed all of them somehow, that he should have been a better friend to Billy and not ignored the signs that he might have been right about the Mind Flayer.

"Not your fault," El said, putting her hands on his shoulders. "Not Billy's fault. Not my fault. Nobody's fault."

She stood up, and Steve looked up at her. "I will talk to Ten," she said, nodding. She turned and gestured for Will and Max. As they left the room for her bedroom, he felt Max's eyes burning into him. When he looked up, he saw that her cheeks were on fire, her nostrils flared, looking at him like she wanted to hit him. He leaned back in his chair and covered his face with his hands.

Steve stood on the threshold of the bedroom where Billy was being kept, looking across the room to where Max was sitting beside him, stroking his hair, her fingers absently touching the heavy restraints on his wrists.

"Can I come in?" he asked her.

She didn't look up.

"I guess," she said, her voice soft and flat.

He stepped into the room, feeling sick. "I'm sorry, Max," he said, swallowing hard. "I just—"

"It's not your fault," Max bit angrily, looking up at him. "Okay? I know it's not. I'm just… He just…"

Her voice cracked. "He was just getting better, and now he's not."

Steve let out a heavy sigh, feeling teary eyed. "I know…"

He crossed his arms and looked down at Billy's face, his eyes tracing the dark tendrils that had crawled back up onto his skin like veins of black ink. The room they were keeping him in, Joyce's bedroom, was overly warm on purpose— Not enough that the bit of the Mind Flayer that was still alive would try and escape, but enough to keep it tired,

keep it down. Billy was sweating profusely, his hair soaking wet and plastered to his head. Even the moderate heat was bothering him. Steve came into the room and was just about to sit on the floor when he saw Billy stir.

“Max!” he called out warningly. “Get back!”

He ran to the dresser and pulled out a syringe from the kit Dr. Owens had brought, squeezing it, readying it. He looked down at Billy and paused. Max, against the window, was staring down at Billy in consternation.

Billy blinked, not fighting his restraints, as though he was dizzy and confused.

“Billy?” Steve asked. He knew the Mind Flayer could make someone seem normal. He stayed back, still holding the syringe.

“S—Steve?” Billy said, his voice hoarse.

“Yeah, it’s Steve…”

“Are you… Real?”

Steve swallowed hard. Nervously, he reached forward and put a hand on Billy’s arm, squeezing him.

“Oh, God,” Billy choked, a sob tearing into his throat. “Oh, thank God…”

Max let out a gasp, and before he could stop her, she had leapt forward, grabbing Billy’s arm.

“Is that really you?” she demanded, holding onto him like he was a life raft.

“Yes,” Billy gasped. “It’s me. I farted on your head once ‘cause I was mad at you. You like Lady Macbeth the most outta all the characters. You think Ralph Maccio is hot.”

Max let out a gasp of relief, touching his hair. Steve threw the syringe onto the dresser and fell to Billy’s side, clutching his arm, unable to

speak.

“How?” Max demanded.

“It’s weak, super weak,” Billy explained, licking his dry lips. “He’s here, but… He’s tired right now…”

“That— That’s good,” Steve stuttered, feeling so relieved he wanted to sob.

“Can I… Can I get a cigarette?” Billy asked, looking like he was millimetres from breaking down.

Steve gestured vaguely to the restraints holding his hands. “We can’t…,” he said, his voice hitching high, trying not to burst into tears. “We can’t…”

He couldn’t even say the words. He was sick to his stomach, watching as Billy’s chest heaved and his eyes squeezed shut, tears leaking from his lashes and down his cheeks.

“Oh God,” Billy gasped, his lips contorted into a grimace as he let out a sob. “Oh God…”

“I… I’ll…,” Steve gasped, unable to look at Billy, barely able to speak. He looked up, tears stinging his eyes, reaching out to Max. “In… In my coat, can you—?”

Max turned and ran to the front door and came back within moments with a pack of his cigarettes. She gave them to him with trembling hands, holding out the lighter.

“Thanks,” he said, trying not to fall into hysterical sobbing. Max was so pale she was almost blue, her eyes wide as saucers, looking like she was about to crumble. Steve put a cigarette to his lips with shaking hands, listening as Billy sobbed beside him, strapped to the bed. He managed to finally get it lit and inhaled. He took the cigarette out of his lips and put it between Billy’s.

“Here,” he sniffed, his voice barely making it out of his throat.

Billy opened his eyes, his face wet. He lifted his head and took a long

drag, the smoke curling out of his nostrils, his head falling back on the bed, holding the cigarette in his lips.

“Oh God…,” he moaned softly around it, closing his eyes. “It’s still alive… I was right… It’s still here…”

Billy let out a hopeless sob. Max went to his other side and threw herself down over his chest, burying her head into his neck, her red hair fanning across his body, her fingers clutching onto him.

“It’s… It‘s gonna be okay,” Steve said, wiping his eyes, tears streaming down his face. “It’s gonna be okay.”

He reached out and swept Billy’s hair off of his forehead, stroking his head. “It’s gonna be okay… We’re figuring somethin’ out. El’s gonna get it outta you. I promise…”

Steve sniffed. “When have I ever lied, huh? I’ve never lied. Can you think of when I’ve lied?”

“No,” Billy choked, turning his head and looking toward him. “You never lied to me.” Steve took his cigarette and ashed it for him, putting it back on his lips.

“Exactly,” Steve said. “Right, Max? I’m as honest as sunshine, right?”

She made a garbled sob that might have been an agreement and he saw her head bobbing in a *Yes* motion.

“See?” Steve said, reaching out and holding Billy’s face. “See? I’ve never lied. And I never broke a promise before, right? We’re gonna help you. We’re gonna win. We’re gonna beat this.”

Billy turned his head so his cheek was lying on Max’s head. He looked toward Steve, crying openly, squeezing his eyes shut. His cigarette was done so Steve took it, crushing it into the ashtray, then scrambled back to kneel at Billy’s side. He watched as Billy twisted his head to give Max an awkward half-kiss on the head. He put his cheek back on her head.

“Steve,” Billy said, trying to get a hold of himself, gasping loudly, forcing himself to get his words out. “Don’t let Max stay in here… I

dunno when… When it'll…"

"I won't," Steve promised, feeling like his heart was breaking, like he was being torn in half. "I'll keep her safe."

Max cried harder.

Steve put his head down on the bed beside Billy's, holding his hand tightly. Not knowing what else to do, he prayed.

Steve heard El and Dr. Owens talking in the kitchen, their voices echoing down the hall. He'd left a few minutes ago. Listening to them debating and planning made him so heartsick he felt nauseus. He sat beside Billy on the carpet of Joyce's bedroom, his legs crossed, his back against the mattress, unable to look at Billy but unwilling to leave him alone. Billy was straining against the ropes keeping his body down, making strange gurgling noises, trying to fight his way out. The little seed of the Mind Flayer in his head had wrested control from him, but it was weak— It couldn't break free. Max stood in the doorway, her arms crossed over her body, her skin pale and her eyes wide, watching her brother writhe. He hated this, this sitting around and planning. It felt like when someone was on their deathbed and their friends and family came to see them one last time, a tense atmosphere of grief and fear pervading the entire house.

"I don't think anybody saw," Max said.

"Wh—What?" Steve asked, confused, lifting his head and staring at her.

"It was quick. Nobody saw but me."

"What are you talkin' about?"

"You… Kissed Billy."

"Oh."

Steve bent his head, too exhausted to care about pretending. "I couldn't think of what else to do. I could… He was still there. He could… He could *see me* , I…" He licked his lips. "I dunno."

Max was silent. He wasn't sure what this meant but he was far too gone to care. He looked over at the clock on Joyce's nightstand and it's red digital numbers read 3:48 AM. He looked up as Will walked by the hallway and peered in. He swallowed and then stood beside Max, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Billy's gonna be okay. I promise."

Max clenched her jaw and nodded. Steve bent his head, looking down at his hands, feeling sick. A few minutes later he looked up as Dr. Owens walked into the room with El in tow.

"Well…," Dr. Owens sighed. "Let's get started…"

Billy was in the dark place. Plane walking, Steve had called it. He was kneeling in the black waters, his hands on his thighs. He knew that the Mind Flayer was there with him. He kept hearing it scurrying behind him in the shadows, just out of his line of sight. He knew it was using his flesh, trying to take him over, but it was weak, and he was stronger. He held on. He knew it was struggling. He felt heat radiating across his body, like a sauna, and sweat dripped from his brow and his lip as if in slow motion, falling into the water at his knees and ankles and sending ripples out into the endless nothing.

"Billy."

He blinked. Eleven was standing in front of him, lowering her hand down. He took her hand and stood up.

"It's here," *he told her.* "In the shadows. How are we gonna kill it?"

"The ghost," *she said.* "Ten."

Billy looked to his left and there they were, the pale child, the kid with white skin and white hair, and eyes like pink stones.

"Kill it," *the child repeated. They took his other hand.*

Billy looked past El and the Ghost, and saw the creeping rot, the tendrils, searching, growing and reaching for them.

"Get out!" *Billy roared at it, snarling. The pale child and El raised their hands.*

"AAAAGHHHHH!" Eleven screamed, blood dripping from her nose, red from her ears leaking down into her hair. She was standing at the foot of the bed, her hands raised, clutching something only she could see. Over her eyes was a bandana, blocking her vision, doing her work in the dark place where she walked on the thin razor's edge of the dimensions. Steve had thrown himself over Billy's chest, using his body weight to pin him down as the heat in the room swelled unbearably, his lips cracked and dry, his hair plastered to his forehead, his skin covered in a sheen of sweat. Max held Billy's head as he writhed like a snake, almost breaking free of the restraints, Dr. Owens panted as he held down one of Billy's legs. At his hips and other leg were Jonathan, Will, and Nancy. Susan stood poised, sweat beading on her skin, holding a syringe in case El was unsuccessful. Joyce stood ready, at the foot of the bed, beside El, holding onto her shoulders, making sure she knew she was safe.

"Higher!" Steve shouted to Robin and Harley, who cranked up the space heaters, gasping for breath.

El was wheezing, trembling, quickly tiring out. Steve flipped his head to look at Billy and gasped, tears running down his face.

"Come on…," he pleaded desperately. "Come on, Billy…. Come on…"

Billy's mouth opened and he screeched.

His eyes flung open, blue and bright. Blood spurted out of his nostrils and ears.

"GEEEET OOOOOUT!" Billy roared hoarsely. *"GEEEET OUT OF MY HEAAAAAD!"*

The lamp on the bedside table and the overhead bedroom light crackled with electricity and then imploded, the glass bulbs shattering. Several people screamed. Steve turned his head, shards of glass raining down on his back. He clutched onto Billy tighter.

“You can do it!” he yelled almost incomprehensibly, burying his head into Billy’s chest. “I love you! I believe in you–"

The noise in the room was gone so suddenly it was as if they’d be sucked into space. Steve lifted his head cautiously, looking around. He watched as the wood panelling of Joyce’s bedroom flickered, bent, and then pulled away, as though it were made of water. He saw someone step across the threshold of the dimensions, someone pale, with white hair. The ghost. The child looked at him, then looked at Billy. Steve turned his head and saw that El was looking at them too, standing at the foot of the bed and calmly giving the Ghost a small smile, her hands loose by her side.

There was nobody else in the room— No Nancy, no Jonathan, no Max or Susan or Joyce or Will… Nobody.

He turned his head the other way and gasped, startled. Above the frozen grimace of Billy’s face on the bed was… Billy. He was standing just behind the headboard, looking down at him, his blue eyes bright, his lips smiling warmly.

“Hey,” *he greeted. Steve blinked. Behind him was endless nothing… Below them was still, black water. The wood panelling of the bedroom had melted away. Steve was in the dark place.*

He was plane walking.

“Shit,” *he muttered, gasping, lifting his body a little off of Billy’s form on the bed.*

“Kill it,” *insisted the pale child.*

“Let’s do it,” *Billy agreed.*

“What should… What should I do?” *Steve asked, his head swivelling between El, Ten, and Billy.*

Billy smiled at him. “Just hold on tight to me and never let go.”

“Okay,” *Steve said, nodding, his heart pounding in his chest. He grasped Billy’s body on the bed tighter, and closed his eyes.*

“AHHHHHH!” Billy screeched in his ear. Steve held onto him so tight

he felt his fingers going numb. He breathed in and knew he was back in the real world, the heat of the space heaters stinging the inside of his nose, the smell of sweat and the tang of blood washing over him. He felt Billy writhe beneath him and then still. The room was silent, only loud gasping punctuating the stale, hot air.

Steve lifted his head and looked to where Eleven had been. She was on the floor, pale, her face a bloody mess, being held by Joyce and looked over by Dr. Owens. Jonathan, Nancy, Harley, Robin, Susan, and Will were staring at him, eyes wide, having stepped back from Billy's body. Steve squeezed his eyes shut and licked his dry lips, turning his head. He opened his eyes and looked at Billy.

His eyes were open, blinking slowly, his nose, lips, and chin stained with blood, the pillow behind his head covered in swatches of red from his ears. Max had never let go, holding the sides of his face in a vice grip.

"You're gonna break my skull, Max," Billy protested, lifting an arm and weakly patting hers.

She let out a gasp of relief and threw her face into the side of his neck, sobbing. Everyone in the room let their shoulders slack, relieved. Billy took his other hand and slid it across Steve's back where he was still sprawled like a dead weight on top of him.

"Thanks for not lettin' go," Billy whispered softly. "Both of you…"

Steve squeezed his eyes shut and let out a sob of relieved laughter.

"Sorry," Steve joked. "Looks like you're stuck with us."

18. "Addicted to Love" - Robert Palmer (1985)

October 16th, 1986

Steve leaned in and took a sip of strawberry milkshake, sucking on the straw and looking up at Billy, who was leaning back in the brown pleather of the restaurant booth, his arm splayed on the back, smoking a cigarette and looking toward the window. They were sitting in a booth against the window at George's Cafe on Main Street. Steve pulled his lips away from the straw with a smack. He pushed the shake to the middle of the table, sticking another straw in it.

"Here— There's two straws. Help me finish this."

Billy blinked twice, and Steve felt a rush of affection at how innocent and sweet he looked when he was caught off guard. It was the only time he looked innocent and sweet— He was a devilish bastard otherwise. But sometimes, Steve caught him in a moment of genuine bashfulness, when his cheeks tinged pink and his eyelashes fluttered over his baby blues. Then it would pass, and he would melt back into the confident little smirk Steve liked so well.

"Alright," was all Billy said, leaning in and taking the bendy straw in his free hand, folding it, putting it between his lips. Steve leaned in too, taking a sip, and Billy's hair tickled his forehead. Their noses almost touched. Billy took a few big gulps before leaning back and smacking his lips.

"You know, that's not bad," he said, tilting his head. "Not as good as this one place in L.A., but still pretty damn good."

"Yeah, yeah," Steve snorted, teasing. "Everything is better in L.A."

"How're you liking workin' for your Dad?" Billy asked, yawning. It was around seven in the evening, a Thursday night. Steve had left work around five o'clock and had called Billy on a whim. He'd been working hard the last two weeks, getting used to running to and fro on the orders of his higher ups. He missed Billy.

“Eh, it’s okay. It’s work. I’m the newest, so of course I’m doing all the menial legwork right now. I can’t complain about the pay, though...”

Steve flicked the straw in his milkshake. “So— How’ve you been feeling? How’s your eyes?” he asked.

Billy turned his head to stare out the window. His hand slid from the back of the booth and he tapped his cigarette into the ashtray.

“Well— The hole they cut to get at my heart and my eyes is pretty much healed. Not really botherin’ me at all, nothing compared to the crap I went through last year, anyway. As far as my eyes… Hm... Well. I dunno,” Billy said thoughtfully. “It’s hard to tell. Are there... Bright lights out this window? White and yellow ones?”

Steve turned and looked out across Main Street, blinking. Outside it was dark, but across from them was the Hawk Theatre, whose marquee was lit brightly in its large, old fashioned bulbs. “Ye-yeah,” Steve said, turning back to Billy, a smile growing on his face. “Can you see them?”

“I— I guess,” Billy said, leaning toward the window. “I mean, it’s not clear or anything... And it’s kinda dim... There’s sort of a big blur, like... A blob of blinking light.”

“We’re across from the Hawk— It has blinking lights. That must be what you’re seeing...” Steve put his elbows on the worn plastic tabletop, crossing them, leaning in over the milkshake. “The surgery must have worked, at least a little.”

“S’hard to say,” Billy shrugged, looking away from the window and back toward him.

“Well— It’s a good sign, at least,” Steve said encouragingly. He noticed Billy tended to play down the good things that happened to him. He hadn’t had a lot of good things happen so it only made sense. He was used to things not working out.

“Yeah,” Billy half agreed. One of his hands was on the table, flexing, a nervous tick that held his feelings in check. Steve watched it for a

moment, then slid his hand across the table. He covered Billy's hand with his, giving it a squeeze.

"It's a *good sign* ," Steve assured quietly, looking into Billy's face.

Billy blinked long, his hand frozen to the tabletop, his mouth parted.

"When did you start seeing dim lights?" Steve asked him, taking another sip of his milkshake. He kept his hand over Billy's, his fingers absentmindedly moving slowly back and forth, his pinkie touching the cold metal of one of his rings. He kept his voice as casual as possible, but inside he was on fire with excitement and nervous energy. Billy was regaining his sight... And he hadn't pulled his hand away. The feeling of his skin under his fingertips was comforting and thrilling in equal measure. Every time he grasped Billy's hand felt like the first time.

"Uh... Couple days ago, but... Wasn't really sure they were actually there 'cause no lights were bright enough, you know? But if you can see them in the same spot I can, guess that means they're actually workin' a little better than before..."

"Yeah," Steve chuckled, his thumb stroking Billy's knuckles. He could tell Billy was overwhelmed. He'd spent a lot of time not seeing and gotten used to life without it. Being able to see again meant his life was going to change dramatically, and from what he'd said before, he was scared that it was going to change for the worse.

"Wonder if you'll look any different, if I do get my sight back," Billy said, tilting his head. "Maybe older... Some lines on your face..."

Steve rolled his eyes.

"Once again I remind you that you're a few months older than me," Steve snorted.

"Oh no, not from age— From *stress* ," Billy smirked. "Dealin' with me and my bullshit."

"Oh well, *that* I can guarantee," Steve laughed, leaning in and sipping more of the milkshake.

He looked over to their intertwined hands as he drank. He knew what he'd felt last month, swaying in the Pacific Ocean: the thing that burned in his throat and deep in his belly, the thing that made his heart pump adrenaline into his veins. He knew that familiar sensation, the lightning before the storm, the electricity travelling on his skin. He knew the feeling for what it was, but his mind could barely fathom it. He liked *women* . He *loved* women— The way they did their hair, the way they walked, the way they talked... He loved to admire them, kiss them... He loved them.

He looked up at Billy, his belly filling with strawberry shake, sickeningly sweet, sucking in his feelings. Billy's eyes were slowly colouring back to their brilliant blue. His eyelashes, he realized, had always dazzled him. His dirty blonde curls were always so dishevelled and somehow perfect, enticing his fingers, daring his hands to touch them. He loved the way Billy swaggered along in jeans that left nothing to the imagination, the smirking and casual way he talked, leaving the G off of every word he said when he was being cocky. He loved his fingers, holding cigarettes, holding him.... Steve looked at Billy's lips and knew something about himself that he had ignored for a long, long time.

He stopped drinking his milkshake, overwhelmed, leaning back, feeling vulnerable and scared, like somehow everyone in the restaurant would know what he knew, like they could see it on him like a target. He'd half realized that he had complicated feelings for Billy, back in L.A., floating in the surf… But he'd never considered it further, too afraid to think about what that meant, about what it said about him.

"You good?" Billy asked him, yawning, putting out his cigarette into the ashtray.

"Ye-Yeah," Steve said, forcing his voice to be casual. "Just— Too much milkshake."

"That's what you get for ordering that giant thing every time we come here," Billy teased, his voice warm. When had Billy become so warm? When had Billy changed from cautiously accepting his presence to loving to be in his company? And when had Steve changed from awkwardly shoving Billy along to making up excuses to

be near him, to be touching him? When had he changed from hanging around Billy to help himself feel better to spending most of his waking hours thinking of him, wishing they were together? It had happened so gradually he'd barely noticed, but now he sat and enjoyed it for what it was: the simple pleasure of being with someone he cared about more than a lot of things in the world.

"Yeah," Steve agreed, a small star-struck smile on his face. "Help me finish it, then."

Billy rolled his eyes, a warm smile on his face, and leaned in, taking the straw in his mouth again. Steve's heart jolted and he leaned forward even though he was full, even though if he had any more strawberry milkshake he'd throw up, because it was an excuse to be close to Billy, to have his head so near him that if they just lifted their faces ever so slightly, their lips would be centimetres away...

Billy pulled away, smacking his lips, and finally took his hand back. Steve blinked and leaned away from the milkshake as though he had been doused in cold water.

"You doin' anything for Halloween?" Billy asked him.

"Well, I know your birthday is the day before— Did you wanna have a party or something?"

"I dunno," Billy shrugged. "I mean, Robin, Harley, and Nance are away at school... I guess it'd be just the two of us."

"Is that bad?" Steve asked him self consciously.

"Not at all," Billy smirked. "I mean— worked out well last time for your birthday, didn't it?"

"I guess it did," Steve agreed, heat flooding back into his body.

"You gonna dress up for Halloween?"

"I want to," Steve said. "But I dunno what I should be..."

"You could be one of those little hairy things from *Star Wars* you told me about," Billy snorted.

“A fucking *ewok* ? No way.”

Steve stretched, pushing the mostly finished strawberry shake away from him, yawning. He looked across the room and saw a family sharing a big bowl of ice cream. His mind drifted to his bloodstained Scoops Ahoy uniform and was suddenly struck with inspiration.

“Wait— I got it!” he said, turning back to Billy and grinning. “But it’ll only work if you agree.”

“Oh?”

“What if I went as you and you went as me,” Steve laughed. “Think about it! You can stuff yourself into that stupid Scoops Ahoy uniform I got, and I’ll wear your lifeguard shorts and grow a moustache.”

Billy crinkled his nose, smiling. “Are you *serious* ?”

“Hell yeah, dude! It’ll be fucking hilarious!”

Just then, a loud clunk rang out beside them, coming from the glass of the diner window they were seated beside. Steve jumped, looking over, and saw the silhouette of a woman pressed against the glass. Someone was pressing themselves against her.

“Jesus, a couple is making out against the window,” Steve informed Billy, laughing. Even as he said these words, his laugh stopped dead in his throat as he heard a man bellowing and the woman let out a strangled yell. Steve’s heart hammered in his chest.

“I don’t think—“ Billy began, already half rising out of his seat.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed quickly, sliding out of the booth and running outside, flinging the door open.

“Hey!” he yelled. “What the fuck is going on?”

A young man Steve vaguely recognized from his school days spun around, looking drunk and wild. The woman against the window crumpled into herself.

“Fuck you!” the man bellowed, walking crookedly toward him, his

eyes rimmed red and his mouth hanging open.

“Go home,” Steve said firmly. Behind him, Billy walked out and slid himself along the wall toward the woman curled on the sidewalk.

“Y’can’t tell me what t’do,” the man snarled. Steve walked forward and gave him a gentle push on the chest, which almost toppled him over. He staggered away, too drunk to care about fighting or too fucked up to keep his thoughts straight. He tumbled his way down the street and into the darkness. Steve let out a sigh of relief. He really didn’t want to have to have his nose broken for a *fourth* time…

He came over to Billy and the stranger, whose pale hands were buried in her big, dark hair. When she lifted her head, her tear stained eyes made him stop in surprise.

“… Tina?” he asked incredulously.

Billy blinked once, and reached out, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m— I’m fine now,” she sniffed, standing up suddenly. Billy rose with her. “You guys can go…”

“Who the fuck was that?” Billy said softly, a dangerous venom in his voice.

“Oh— just— just my boyfriend…”

“You boyfriend? What— Tina…” Steve sighed sadly.

“I’m fine, really,” she said quickly, wiping her mascara stained cheeks with the sleeve of her coat. “I’ll just go home…”

Now that Steve could get a good look at her under the bright lights above the diner, he noticed that she looked thin, an unhealthy sheen to her skin, almost sickly. He swallowed uncomfortably. Tina had been just as silly and shallow as he had been once, and now… Well. He felt hollow.

“We’ll drive you,” Billy said, his voice brooking no argument.

“I— it’s fine—“

“Tina,” Billy said, turning her gently with both of his hands. “It’s not fine.”

Tina looked into Billy’s face and something seemed to break inside of her. Steve knew she’d dated him for a little while, but as far as he knew, they’d mostly had a friends with benefits kind of relationship that had eventually faded. As far as he was aware, their relationship had never gone sour. She probably trusted him. Tina had always been a party girl, had gotten herself into trouble more times than he could count… He guessed that she was probably like Billy in many ways, the only difference being that Tina’s daddy (or more specifically, his money) had always shown up to bail her out of whatever sticky situation she’d put herself into…

Just like himself.

Tina burst out crying, putting her face in her hands, and Billy surprised Steve by wrapping his arms around her. He left them alone and went back inside, leaving a twenty on the counter for the waitress, who looked concerned when he came in.

“Is she okay? Should I call somebody?”

“No, thanks, Ruth, it’s fine. We’re gonna take her home.”

“Alright…”

Steve went back outside, and Tina was leaning against the window, sniffing wetly and smoking a cigarette. Billy had an arm flung over her shoulders.

“We’re parked just up here,” Steve told her gently. “Why don’t you follow me and help Billy?”

She nodded, still sounding like she’d start crying at any moment. Billy walked slowly with her, side by side, and they all got into the car, Tina sitting in the back seat. He started the engine and drove off aimlessly. He wanted to calm her down before he drove her home.

“So— Who was that guy?” Steve asked curiously. “I know you said he was your boyfriend, and he looked kinda familiar, but…”

“God,” Tina gulped. “I’m so fucking embarrassed… He’s… Remember Robert Coltrane?”

Steve’s eyes widened in shock. “That was *Robbie Coltrane* ?”

Robert Coltrane had been one of his classmates all through school, another kid whose parents had more money than they knew what to do with, who’d driven expensive cars, looked handsome, had all the coolest clothes, and had been captain of the football team. The person he’d told to go home tonight looked nothing like him.

“Yeah,” Tina sniffed, somewhat bitterly. “I know… He looks different now, doesn’t he?”

“Jesus,” Steve muttered. “What happened?”

He felt like his world had shifted, just like it had when he had come to the Byers’ house to beg for Nancy to take him back and a monster had ripped through his sense of security. He and Robbie Coltrane had lived almost identical lives. If the universe had shifted ever so slightly to the left on the day of their births, Steve could have been him… And now he was drunk and beating a girl. He’d like to think he’d never go down that path, that he would have known when to stop… And he thanked his lucky stars that he *had* known when enough was enough, that he had reached a point where the pettiness of the life he’d lived alongside people like Robbie wasn’t enough in the face of real love.

“Well…,” Tina began. “I didn’t want to go to college even though my Dad said he’d pay for it… God, I’m so stupid…”

She sniffed loudly, trying to get ahold of herself, taking a few deep breaths. She started again. “So, I got a job. File clerk, nothing special… Robbie also didn’t go to college. He said he was waiting for a management position or some shit at his Dad’s company… I don’t even know anymore… We ended up together, moved into a little house off of Church street…“

She bent her head, twisting something on her finger. “He said he wanted to marry me, but…”

She trailed off, wringing her hands in her lap and looking back up into the front where Steve and Billy were listening quietly.

“He always drank a lot. I mean, we all did... But we both started drinking *too* much, you know? Lost a lot of money... And he started...”

She closed her eyes. “He changed,” she finished quietly.

A silence reigned in the car. Billy lit a cigarette and crossed his arms, his face set.

“We’re not takin’ you back to the house off Church street,” he said stubbornly.

“Billy,” Tina said, exasperated. “It’s my house, I have to—“

“Don’t your parents still live here?” Steve asked her.

Her mouth clamped shut. Her lips twisted a few times before she answered. “Yes...”

“Well— Why don’t we take you back to their house? At least for the night?”

Tina looked up into the ceiling of the car, swallowing loudly. “We... They don’t wanna see me anymore. My parents... They...,” she stopped, wiping her eyes. “I just can’t, okay?”

“This is serious, and I know they love you... Hell, your Dad loved you enough to hate me when we were datin,’ right?” Billy said, reaching a hand back and touching Tina’s knee. “Listen... You just made a mistake. You made some bad choices, but... As mad as they were, I don’t think they’d be mad now. They’ll be happy to see you again, y’know?”

Steve blinked, stopping at a red light, looking sidelong at Billy with a flare of pride shooting up through his chest. The advice he was giving Tina was sweet and kind, and Steve knew it had nothing to do with him— but he couldn’t help but feel proud of him anyway. Billy had been so quiet, his emotions so rehearsed and hard to read for so long. Steve knew that he was comfortable doing this kinda thing with him,

as they'd gone through a lot together, but it was nice to see Billy's kindness being given to someone else.

"We'll take you home, to your parents," Steve said softly.

Tina put her hand in Billy's. As the light turned green, Steve flicked his eyes back to her in the rear view mirror. She was staring unabashedly at Billy, who was half turned in his seat, his foggy eyes staring into the middle distance. She looked like she was trying to find something in Billy's face that she wasn't seeing, something she was expecting to see but wasn't there anymore. She caught Steve looking at her in the rear view mirror and stared him down, an ironic, teary eyed smile on her face.

"God," she whispered, her voice constricted, trying for a joking tone. "What the fuck happened to us all?"

"I dunno," Steve said quietly.

Steve and Billy watched and listened from the car as Tina reunited with her parents. Her Dad pulled her into a hug and her mother hovered behind them underneath the porch light like a moth, overtaken with joy and grief. Tina eventually turned and raised a hand toward them, waving goodbye. Steve lifted a hand out of the side window and waved back. He didn't stick around. They had a lot of healing to do and he wasn't about to sit there and be a voyeur of what happened next. He was just happy Billy had been right, and that her parents were grateful they'd helped return her back to somewhere she'd be safe.

He started the car and drove away down the street. Billy looked contemplative, his brows furrowed slightly, obviously lost in thought.

"You think she'll be okay?" Billy asked him eventually, biting his thumbnail.

"Yeah," Steve said encouragingly. "I think she will be. You were right, her Dad hugged her almost immediately. I think they're just happy she's safe."

“Mm,” Billy hummed, his voice low. He licked his lips, thinking for a few moments before he spoke again.

“It just felt... A little close to home,” Billy muttered.

Steve looked at him out of the corner of his eye, then flicked his eyes back out onto the road.

“I know,” he said quietly. He moved his hand from the gearshift and put it on Billy‘s knee. Billy leaned his head back, closing his eyes. His hand slid down and took Steve’s, lacing their fingers together. They held hands the entire way back to Cherry Oak drive.

October 17th, 1986

Robin watched from the window of her dorm room as a shiny blue BMW pulled into the parking lot of the residence. She perked up, smiling, throwing back the lacy curtains she and Harley had installed to help their room look less like a prison cell. She watched as someone got out of the car, and recognized the pretty hair that the driver swiped out of his eyes. She unfastened the window and leaned out of it into the warm October sunshine.

“Steve!” she yelled.

He looked up and grinned, waving. She shut the window and grabbed her keys, sliding her slippers on and leaving the room, locking the door behind her. She scampered down the hall and down the stairs, passing by students coming and going, holding books and backpacks. She ran to the front door and opened it to a grinning Steve, a pair of wayfarers over his eyes.

“Hey,” he said, flicking them down his nose.

“Hey, stud,” she said in a low, gruff voice, raising her eyebrows.

He laughed and followed her in, taking the stairs two at a time as they climbed up to her dorm. As they alighted the landing at the top of the stairwell, a girl came out and stopped dead, giving them a weird look.

“Um...,” she said, looking between Steve and Robin.

“What?” Robin asked, confused.

“Isn’t this... An all girls dorm?”

Steve gasped dramatically and gently swiped her arm.

“Robin Buckley! Are you breaking the rules?”

“Are you like... Her boyfriend?” the girl asked, leaning in.

“Oh yeah,” Steve said seriously. “Love this girl. Hopefully someday, I’ll get to marry her.”

The girl leaned back and smirked, nodding. She mimed zipping her lips shut and stepped past them, going down the stairs. Robin shoved him through the stairwell door and burst out laughing.

“Come on, you dingus,” she snorted. They went down the hall and she unlocked the door to her dorm room, letting Steve in. He yawned and went inside, looking around. He whistled loud, putting his hands on his hips.

“Wow,” he said, smirking. “I’m impressed. You can’t even tell it’s made of cinderblocks and cheap labour.”

“Thanks!” Robin grinned, coming over to her bed and sitting down on it. Steve joined her, stretching out. He looked tired.

“Rough day at the office, sweetie?” she asked him, patting him on the belly.

“No, not really,” Steve shrugged. “Just doing a lot of running around. Haven’t actually got to do my real job yet, just mostly running favours for the douche bag sales guys.”

“Aw, chin up, Steve,” Robin said soothingly. “Someday you’ll be a douchebag sales guy and get to bully some other poor new guy.”

Steve laughed, shaking his head. He lifted his arms and folded them behind his head, using his feet to kick off his sneakers. They fell to

the floor in a heap. He crossed his ankles.

“Well, at least I didn’t have to wear dress shoes today,” Steve sighed gratefully. “You should see me at this job, Robin… Linen pants, dress shirt, suit coat… Sleeves rolled up… I look like I’m about to shoot a Ferrari commercial. It’s kinda sickening.”

“Ew,” Robin laughed, letting her slippers fall to the floor and lying beside Steve, folding her hands on her stomach.

“Anyways. Whatever, it’s money. Enough about me. How’s college?”

“So good,” Robin sighed happily. “I mean, I’m surrounded by snooty know-it-alls… What more could I, a notorious snooty know-it-all, ask for?”

Steve chuckled and elbowed her gently. “You’re gonna learn so much cool shit and then you’re gonna realize how fuckin’ dumb I am and never speak to me again…”

“That’s not true,” Robin said smiling. “Talking to you keeps me humble, you know? You’re my link to the world beyond academia…”

“Oh, fuck off,” Steve chortled, throwing his sunglasses off his head. “How’s Harley?”

“She’s great. She’s settling in really well. She already made a bunch of friends, which is good, ‘cause I’m kinda bad at making friends, so… I just get to inherit hers. She’s excited for snow!”

“Oh, so innocent… She has no idea what’s coming…”

“Absolutely none,” Robin agreed gleefully. “This time in February she’s gonna be hating her life.”

Robin stole Steve’s sunglasses and put them on her face. “So how’s Billy?”

“He’s pretty good. Susan’s divorcing Neil, so… That’s good, but they’re kinda struggling a bit. They only have Susan’s income right now, and it isn’t anything to shake a stick at. I think Billy feels kinda bad…”

“How’s his eyes?”

“Well, he said he can see like… Vague blobs of light. I’m hoping that it’ll improve as time passes. I think that’s what Dr. Owens was kinda gettin’ at. They officially killed and removed what was still there, but the tissue underneath had to repair itself… Anyways. Here’s hoping.”

“Yeah,” Robin nodded. She thought back to their day trip to the mall last year and marvelled at it, how much had happened since then. She bit her lip, the question she’d asked him back then when he’d dropped her off coming back to her. She’d asked him if he’d ever thought about kissing a guy, and he’d been baffled. He’d thought she was joking. She twisted her lip. She’d seen a change come over Steve in the last year since that day and debated asking him again, but she felt like there was much more on the line this time, like if she cracked open that can of worms they’d never be able to put it back.

“Whatcha thinkin’ about?” Steve asked her, putting his fist under his chin and furiously batting his eyelashes jokingly.

“Oh, just… You,” Robin answered truthfully. She felt like there was something he really wanted to talk about but was too afraid to bring up.

“Little old me?” he asked, putting a faux-surprised hand on his chest.

Robin rolled her eyes. “Cut the crap, dude,” she sighed, half smiling and turning her head on the pillow to look at him. “I know you wanna talk about something, so— What is it? Spill the beans.”

Steve swallowed. “What makes you think there are beans to spill?”

“ *We gotta talk* ,” Robin mocked, raising her eyebrows, “You did say that, didn’t you? Before I left for college?”

“Ye—Yeah, I did say that,” Steve sighed, letting out a breath, his hair fluttering.

“So…?”

“Well… I just…”

Steve clicked his tongue uncomfortably.

“Let’s say there was a person who was... Known for his game with the ladies— ignoring the scoreboard a lesbian kept at his job selling ice cream— who had perfect hair, and was sorta devilishly handsome and charming—“

“Alright,” Robin interrupted, rolling her eyes.

“Let’s just say this super handsome, charming guy started to… Think about some stuff…”

“Uh huuuh...” she prompted.

“And when he thought about… Stuff… He realized that he kinda… Really liked to stare at the novelty mug his Mom got at a show in Las Vegas once… *You* know the show… And maybe he was just thinking how girls were really beautiful and stuff, y’know, thought they were like... Really hot and stuff, but... Lately he realized that maybe... He might also... Think that men... Are also kinda hot?”

Robin laughed, loudly, gleefully, her heart leaping with joy in her chest. She couldn’t help it. She’d suspected this for a long time. “I think you might be a little gay, dude...” Robin snorted, taking his hand, turning into her side and hugging him fiercely.

“Oh Jesus,” Steve muttered, his voice hitching, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I am, aren’t I? Shit… I’m a little gay...”

He shook his head, a pained expression on his face. His cheeks were burning red. He sniffed, wiping his nose with his free hand. There were tears edging the corners of his eyes, and she reached out and rubbed his belly soothingly.

“It’s okay, buddy…,” she said softly.

“I mean I realized it a while ago, but I pushed it down, you know?” he said, this voice thick with emotion.

“And how’d that work out for you?” Robin asked gently, unable to keep the smile from her face.

“I’m lying in a tiny bed with a lesbian in a college dorm room and crying,” Steve said, snorting, turning his head and looking at her. “Obviously not that great…”

Steve sighed, flopping his head back and staring into the concrete ceiling. He rubbed his face with both of his hands. “I just... I love women! I do! I like girls, I think they’re hot, I like to kiss them and have sex with them, and... I just also think that I might feel that way about... About guys, too and... I dunno. I can’t choose...”

Robin raised her head and gave him a funny look.

“You don’t have to *choose* , Steve,” she laughed in amazement. “You can like *both* , you know...”

Steve flung his head to the side, staring at Robin with wide eyes. “Wh— You can *do that?!”* he demanded.

“Why the hell *n ot ?”* Robin asked, giggling.

Steve looked back up at the ceiling. She could see the wheels turning in his head, his eyebrows furrowed, blinking slowly.

“I... I guess I never thought about it like that,” he said, looking like he’d just had his mind blown with *Looney Toons* grade TNT. She patiently waited as he processed this information.

“I just... I... Shit, I dunno what to say,” he said.

“Just go with what you feel,” Robin said, putting her head back down on his shoulder. “If you find a hot girl, you find a hot girl. If you find a hot guy, you find a hot guy. Whatever you’re feeling. It’s all cool.”

“I…”

Steve trailed off and looked seriously into her eyes.

“You knew for a long time,” he said, stating a fact.

“Yeah,” Robin said quietly. “I did.”

“You... You just kept it to yourself?”

“It’s not fun when people call you a dyke and then they turn out to be right,” Robin said flatly, making a sour face. Many of her bullies in middle school had bullied her for something they had no idea was actually true.

“That’s... Thank you,” Steve said sincerely, reaching out and pulling her closer. “Thanks for... Just letting me figure it out on my own. I know how mean they were to you... I guess I’m lucky. I’m a guy, and I was popular, and... Nobody would’ve thought I was like this. Not even me, apparently...”

“It’s fine,” Robin said, trying to brush off the hurt of the old wounds, “I’m glad I got to be there for you and sorta... Give you that room, y’know? It’s... What I would’ve wanted.”

Robin felt herself choking up now, the incredible gravity and joy of the situation fully hitting her. She was now surrounded by people like her, both as acquaintances and as her dear friends, something she never thought she would have in a thousand years. Learning Billy was like her had made her feel like she’d been on top of the world— And every time that circle grew she felt her heart widening, hope for the future glowing as she became enfolded into a community, a family where love like hers was beautiful and celebrated. She sniffed, drying her eyes on the sleeve of her button up shirt. She heard Steve clear his throat thickly.

“Was I the first one you told?” Steve asked her, his voice hoarse. She ignored the tears winding slowly down his face.

“Yeah. Am I the first one you told?”

“Yeah,” Steve said.

Robin took his hand and squeezed it. She looked up at the ceiling and took a deep breath.

“I would have never, in a million years, expected this to be my life now,” Steve said, smiling softly despite himself, sniffling.

Robin looked at him. “Well... You’re still in Hawkins and you work for your Dad... Isn’t that *exactly* where you said you were gonna end

up?"

Steve laughed, shaking his head, a loud and sudden sound that broke through the tangled emotions winding in both of their hearts. Robin giggled, laying her head back on her pillow, watching the sun stream in through the lacy curtains and knowing that she was loved, that she was trusted, and that she wasn't alone— That she would never be alone again.

"Yeah," Steve chuckled, finally getting ahold of himself. "I guess you're right. I *am* exactly where I said I'd be."

October 21st, 1986

Steve came out of the back offices of the BMW dealership, pulling his tie loose and sighing, holding a thin sandwich he'd hastily cobbled together earlier that morning. It was a somewhat dry affair with not enough mayo and very unappealing lunch meat, and he ate it joylessly. He was very tired today. Ever since he'd come back home from his visit with Robin, he'd felt like he was operating two different lives, one where he'd finally become what his Dad had always wanted him to become, and one where he was actually himself. He knew there weren't really any differences between the person that helped the sales guys do their paperwork and the guy who sometimes looked too long at his coworker Mark and marvelled at his nice eyes and smooth brown skin... But he felt split down the middle all the same. If his Dad wasn't breathing down his neck, he might feel a little better. Donnie Harrington was determined to make sure his son was back on the straight and narrow, and Steve felt both fearful and smug that he happened to be only *one* of those things.

He tossed his suit jacket over his shoulder and strode across the showroom where Mark was extolling the virtues of a brand new 1987 3 Series to a young couple. Mark waved at him, smiling, and he waved back. He looked away quickly, trying to hide the flush on his cheeks. He always felt like people could tell plain as day what he'd only just realized about himself, but he knew that probably wasn't true. The only reason Robin had been able to tell was because she was like him. Or, at least, he *hoped* that was the case. As he reached the doors, he saw someone coming in, someone he recognized.

“Tina?” he asked, stopping short, his mouth full of his sad sandwich.

“Um... Hi Steve,” she said, tucking her hair behind her ear, shuffling her purse absently. “Is this a bad time?”

“Oh— No, I was just on my lunch break,” Steve said, swallowing his food. “How’ve you been?”

“Better,” Tina said, smiling at him. She looked out toward the parking lot filled with shiny new BMWs in silvers, greys, greens, and pretty whites. “Is there somewhere we could like, talk?”

“Uh, yeah!” Steve said, gesturing outside. “Honestly? This sandwich is awful. What would you say to lunch?”

“Yeah,” she smiled, nodding. “That sounds good.”

They went outside and Steve took her around back, getting in the 84’ his Dad had gifted him as a congratulations for finally ‘smartening up’ and ‘taking the initiative’... As if that had anything to do with your Dad owning a dealership and you getting a job on principle. As he got in, his Dad came out with a group of men his age, smoking a cigar. Seeing him with Tina, he gave a grin and a nod, waving. Steve waved back.

Tina gave him a look as they drove out of the parking lot.

“So... Is everything going okay?” Steve asked her, in the privacy of the car.

“Yeah,” Tina sighed. “It just sucks. I broke off my engagement with Robbie... His parents were totally weird about it. They said that it was my fault that he ended up like that, and... Whatever. I know it’s not my fault at all. They’re totally just as screwed up as him...”

“I’m sorry that happened, Tina,” Steve sighed. Between Robbie and Tommy H., he wasn’t exactly hopeful about the rest of his peers’ attitudes, no matter how their schooling or employment shook out. He realized that he’d escaped that life by a hair’s breadth, and thanked his lucky stars that he’d made the decision to stand up for how he felt for once. Tommy had once angrily told him that getting his ass kicked by Jonathan Byers had rattled his brain, and maybe it

had— But in a good way.

“It’s okay,” Tina said, shrugging. “Well— It’s not okay, but I think it will be.”

Steve pulled up to George’s and parked, getting out. The lunch hour was busy and they waited in line for a few minutes until a table cleared. Sitting down in a booth, they ordered lunch.

“Your parents... They were okay with you coming home?” Steve asked her, adding some creamer to his coffee.

“Yeah,” Tina laughed softly, sounding grateful. “Daddy was happy to see me. Mom’s still kinda pissed, but she’s coming around. She’s sort of... I dunno. She half blames me and half blames Robbie, and it’s like... In her head, if I hadn't been such a party girl this wouldn’t have happened to me... I dunno...”

“That’s not true,” Steve said firmly, thinking of Billy, Susan, and Max. “The shit he was putting you through... It can happen to anybody.”

Tina flicked her eyes up from her sugar packet, biting the inside of her lip.

“Billy,” she muttered quietly, under her breath.

“Yeah,” Steve sighed, leaning back. She must have seen something Billy hadn’t wanted her to see. It made sense now why there wasn’t animosity between them like so many of his exes in Hawkins. She must have just realized why he was pushing her away.

“Is he... Okay?” Tina asked.

Steve paused as the waitress delivered their club sandwiches. He thanked her, then leaned in.

“They’re all okay now,” Steve said quietly, nodding, “His—“

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a familiar pickup truck driving down Main Street and felt a jolt of fear to see it was Neil’s pickup truck. The truck drove by then turned down a side street. Hawkins wasn’t the smallest town in Indiana, but it was certainly small

enough that you couldn't completely escape from someone. That was the first time he'd seen Neil since he'd left. Steve started again, his mouth dry.

"His Dad doesn't live with them anymore," Steve finished.

"Good," Tina said, nodding. They ate in silence for a while.

"I owe you and Billy," Tina said, wiping her mouth on a napkin.

"No, you don't," Steve scoffed lightly, waving her off. He took a sip of his coffee.

"Maybe not, but... I wanna do something nice for you guys," she said, holding her mug in front of her. "I was thinking... It's Billy's birthday the day before Halloween, right?"

"Right," Steve nodded.

"Well... What if I host a party? Half-Halloween, half-birthday party for Billy?"

Steve looked at Tina's grinning face and shook his head, chuckling. "Okay, party girl... What do your parents think of that?"

"They said yes, so long as this is the last big party I ever have in their house," Tina laughed.

"Yeaaah," Steve said, grinning. "That makes sense... How many times did you have to repaint the living room walls?"

" *'Peach-Kissed Pink* ' is what the colour is called, and it's 18.99 per paint can," Tina recited, giggling.

Steve shook his head. "Sorry. I think in my sophomore year I was responsible for some of that property damage..."

Tina giggled. "What do you think?"

"Yeah," Steve agreed, taking a bite of his club sandwich and swallowing it with a swig of coffee. "I think he'd like that. He's better with crowds now, he had a hard time with them for a bit now. I think

he wants to start doin' the stuff he used to do again."

"You and him got really close this year," she stated, sipping her coffee.

"Yeah," Steve shrugged. "I also got close with Robin Buckley and Nancy Wheeler... Again."

Tina laughed in bemusement. "What is it with you and Nancy?"

"I dunno," Steve said, rubbing his forehead, smiling.

"Well, invite them! I know they're at college and stuff, but Halloween's on a Friday so they clips come down for the weekend or something."

Steve regarded Tina over his food, her bright eyes that had looked so dull and exhausted not a few days before. He'd seen this look before, on Max, in the weeks after Neil left. Exhausted, hurt, pale… But hopeful – Tentatively, cautiously hopeful.

"Alright," he said, reaching out and shaking her hand goofily. "Sounds great."

October 30th, 1986

Billy was drifting off to sleep when the phone rang. He groaned, turning over, and grabbed it from his side table.

"Hullo?"

"Hey, it's Steve, I'm so sorry I didn't call earlier. I know you're probably half asleep. We had a bit of a fuckin' train wreck at work and I'm just getting home now."

"Is everything okay?" Billy croaked, concerned, blinking in the darkness.

"Oh— Everything's fine, it wasn't like an emergency, just a company-wide phone blackout, that kinda thing," Steve chuckled, sounding caught off guard by his question. " *I'm just calling 'cause I wanted to say happy*

birthday!"

"Oh— oh," Billy said. He grinned into his ceiling, his cheeks warm.

" *It's like ten to midnight so I'm sorta cutting it close, sorry about that…"*

Billy closed his eyes. The fact that Steve had been so eager to call and so apologetic that he hadn't meant the world to him.

"Hey— Thanks for calling," Billy said sincerely, his voice quiet. "That's real nice of you."

" *Of course!"* Steve chuckled. *"It's your birthday. You ready for tomorrow?"*

"Got my shorts picked out," he smiled.

"Awesome. I'm leaving work early tomorrow 'cause I worked so late tonight— I'll see you around like three?"

"Sure," Billy agreed. He had an almost sickeningly sweet thought about what it'd be like to fall asleep on the phone with Steve, just listening to him. Then, his practical side caught up with him and reminded him of phone bills and divorces and money and all the other obnoxious difficulties of living that made being in love harder than it should be.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Billy said.

"See you tomorrow! Goodnight. Sleep tight. Don't let the Demogorgans bite."

Billy burst out laughing, unable to stop himself. "Go to bed, you weirdo," Billy snorted affectionately.

" *You too. See you tomorrow."*

"See you."

Billy put the phone back in the cradle and lay back down. He closed his eyes, crossing his arms behind his head on the pillow, a lazy and warm smile spreading across his face.

He loved Steve so fucking much.

October 31st, 1986

Steve came into the bathroom in Billy's house, chucking him a beer, which he managed to catch with the tips of his fingers.

"Woah, could you see that coming?"

"Not really, I was just kinda lucky," Billy snorted, leaning against the bathroom sink.

"Alright... Let's get ready," Steve said, smiling, pulling the tab off his beer and flicking it into the garbage can. He shotgunned it in one go and put the can on the counter, burping loudly and shuffling his hands together.

"Okay," he said. "If you're gonna become me for this party, you gotta *get ready* like me."

"Right," Billy said wryly, finishing off his beer. "I won't shave my nuts."

"Shut the fuck up," Steve snorted, swatting Billy on the forehead. "So — To make your transformation legit, I brought some stuff from home."

Steve bent and rummaged through a duffel bag full of his hair care products that he'd brought with him while Billy crossed his arms, smirking, amused. Steve opened the zipper of the bag and pulled out a bottle of Herbal Essences Organics, holding it like it were a sacred relic.

"That's right," Steve said, affecting a serious tone. "I'm letting you use my shampoo and Farrah Fawcett."

Billy whistled, raising his eyebrows. " *Damn* , Harrington. You really *do* like me."

"I'm glad you get how serious this is," Steve said, sighing wistfully. "Farrah's spray was discontinued two years ago and I only got five

cans left."

Billy put a hand over his heart and reached for Steve, putting a hand on his arm and giving him a soppy look. "I'll treasure this moment always," he said, trying to make his voice sound serious, the corners of his lips betraying him.

"Thank you," Steve sniffed, nodding sagely. "Now— Stand in the shower."

"Wh— Steve, I'm pretty sure I can wash my own fuckin' hair," Billy snorted, giving him a funny look.

"Too much shampoo and you'll frizz, too little and you'll go flat. I don't trust you. Now, get in and dunk your head."

Billy looked extremely amused, but did as he was asked, pulling off his t-shirt and moving over to the tub, throwing back the shower curtain and climbing in, leaning his head forward and turning on the shower. Steve watched as he soaked his hair, running his fingers through his dirty blonde curls.

"See— I can tell just by the way you're touching your hair you'd have ruined it," Steve heckled him, laughing.

Billy shot him a bemused look from behind his sopping wet bangs, and then straightened up, his hair dripping. "Okay, I'm wet, pretty boy," Billy said, his arms akimbo.

"Alright," Steve said, coming near, holding the bottle of shampoo. He did some quick calculations and added slightly more soap to his palm than he would have normally used, taking into account Billy's longer hair. "Kay, turn around," he instructed. "I gotta pretend like it's my own hair..."

Billy rolled his eyes, smirking, and turned around. "I'm just gonna sit," he said, lowering himself and leaning his back against the edge, crossing his feet and sitting down in the tub.

Steve sat down in front of the tub, crossing his legs. He reached forward, his hands full of shampoo, and began to massage it into

Billy's scalp. It didn't escape him that Billy's shoulders were raised, that despite his jokes, he was tense. He'd gotten used to a lot of different kinds of touches in the last while, Steve noticed any time he introduced a new kind of touch Billy's body tensed. Steve wasn't even sure if Billy knew he was tense or if it was a reaction that he hadn't even noticed. He tilted his head thoughtfully, working from back to front, his fingers curling in Billy's hair. He'd only ever touched it lightly before and was amazed at how thick it was. Despite all the fame he had for his own hair, it was relatively flat if he didn't do anything with it. Billy's hair was something else entirely, almost like it had a life of its own.

"What shampoo do you even use?" Steve asked him, noticing how his curls seemed to drink the shampoo like they were thirsty for water.

"Just whatever's there," he shrugged, flicking a hand toward the corner of the tub. Steve looked at the bottle and shook his head.

"Dude, your hair is literally screaming for moisture. Can't you hear it?"

He took a soapy lock of Billy's hair, flicking it near his fair, affecting a strangled, high pitched voice. "Billlyyyyy," he wheezed, making a funny face. *"Pleaaaase waaaater meeeeee!"*

Billy swatted him gently, snorting. Steve went back to working the shampoo through his hair, watching in satisfaction as big, creamy suds bubbled up. He figured Billy probably used whatever was available because he couldn't really afford to get anything else.

"Listen, I'll leave this bottle here for you… And if you're not satisfied within thirty days, money back guarantee," he joked, running his fingers through the longest part of Billy's hair.

"If you want," Billy shrugged. His shoulders had relaxed.

"Bend your head back," Steve instructed him. He did, his eyes closing, a tiny relaxed smile in the corner of his mouth. As Steve worked at his hairline and around his ears, methodically scrubbing, he watched as the last bit of anxiety melted away and he let his head lean a little into Steve's hands, allowing him to take some of his

weight.

Steve chuckled softly. “There you go,” he said, smiling.

“Y’know,” Billy said mildly, “My Dad’d probably call me a fuckin’ faggot right now if he seen this.”

Steve grinned, laughing softly. “Y’know, I’m starting to get the feeling that you don’t give a shit if he thinks that’s what you are or not.”

“He thought it anyway, no matter what I did, so… It doesn’t fuckin’ matter,” Billy snorted, shrugging lightly. Steve watched as some of the tension worked its way back into his shoulders, so he moved his soapy hands down from Billy’s head to his bare shoulders. He tentatively rubbed them, working his fingers into the muscles he found there.

“Well… If he’s already made up his mind, it doesn’t matter what you do, right? Plus—,” Steve added on, laughing lightly. “I think all the horrible shit he has goin’ on in his head had a bad effect on him, I mean— Look at that fuckin’ bald spot! All that hate burnt a hole in his hair.”

Billy laughed, and Steve smiled down at him, adjusting himself, the wet tub squeaking under his dry skin.

“So no bad thoughts,” Steve said, ruffling the top of Billy’s scalp. “It’ll ruin your princess curls.”

“Princess curls,” Billy repeated under his breath, shaking his head and smirking.

Steve grinned down at him, and tapped Billy’s shoulder, standing up. “Okay— Rinse.”

“You trust me to rinse properly?” Billy asked him sarcastically, smiling, his head full of suds. “I’m honoured.”

“You’ve become trustworthy,” Steve said seriously, giving him a salute. “Godspeed.”

Billy shook his head, smiling into the shower as he rinsed out the soap. Steve noticed, amused, that he copied the motions he'd been using on his scalp with the shampoo instead of the rough shaking he'd been doing before.

"So you *can* teach an old dog new tricks!" he called to Billy over the noise of the shower, rinsing his hands in the sink. He laughed at the mirror, watching as Billy gave him the finger. After the shampoo was thoroughly rinsed, Billy got out, putting a towel around his neck.

"Alright," Billy said. "What next?"

"Counter," Steve ordered, bending down and looking through his duffel bag of products. He took out Farrah and his blow drier, and stood up. He paused.

Billy was bent over the counter, his chest against the plastic, his ass in the air, giving Steve a very saucy look.

"Jesus," Steve said, rolling his eyes. He shifted, a little uncomfortable in his jeans. He was *very* glad Billy couldn't totally see yet.

"What?" Billy protested. "You ordered me on the counter!"

" *Sit* on the counter, dumbass," Steve snorted, pulling off the cap to Farrah. Billy put up his hands defensively, sliding his chest off the plastic surface of the counter and turning around, sitting on it. Steve tried not to notice that Billy surreptitiously adjusted his shorts as he faced him. Steve shook the can of hairspray, the familiar motion helping to bring down his body temperature… Among other things.

"Alright," Steve began. "I spray a little in before I blow dry..."

He ignored Billy's arrogant little smirk at the double entendre and sprayed a little in Billy's hair, and then plugged in his hairdryer. He turned it on, working at Billy's hair, smoothing it back and ruffling it so it would sit the way his did. All in all, it took fifteen minutes of blow drying and occasional spritzes of Farrah to get Billy's hair looking like his own. He turned off the hair drier, putting it on the counter, and admired his work.

"Pretty close, but... It's time for the moustache to go."

“Do you trust me to shave, or is there a special Steve Harrington method that I don’t know about?”

“Well... No, but...”

Steve shifted on his feet, his cheeks flushing. “I did bring something special, since it’s your birthday...”

Steve bent and retrieved a little box from his bag. It was a worn green case with silver clasps. He put it on the counter and opened it. Inside was a straight razor, its handle silvery and glinting in the bathroom light.

“I dunno if you’ll want me to do this, but... My great-grandpa bought this straight razor for my grandpa Howard after he came home alive from the war. He passed it down to my Dad on his eighteenth birthday, and I inherited it on mine. I’ve been watching my Dad use it all my life. Started using it when I was like fifteen, even though I barely had any facial hair at all then,” Steve chuckled.

He licked his lips and finally looked at Billy. He was staring at him, his eyes widened, his mouth parted slightly.

“And, I dunno… Since it was your birthday, I thought maybe it’d be cool to give you a nice shave with it...,” Steve said, shrugging self-consciously. “I know it’s kinda stupid, and not really a gift or anything, but–”

“It’s not stupid,” Billy said slowly, interrupting him. “That’s… Nice. S’nice of you.”

“Do you trust me with it?”

Billy looked at him, his eyes crinkled in humour, a small and easy smile on his lips. “Yeah,” he said. “I trust you.”

Steve let out a small breath. His head buzzed with so many thoughts and emotions all at once that he had to stop and calm himself. He was pretty sure about a lot of things at that moment, but fear and habit were still his masters. Instead of thinking about the way Billy’s soft smile made him feel weightless, he busied himself getting the

razor ready.

Billy leaned his head back, Steve's fingers on his chin, directing his head with gentle pressure. It was *so* like Steve to have such a hoity-toity way of shaving, to know how to work a straight razor when the rest of the world had long given them up. There was something oddly charming about the little ways that Steve, like the town of Hawkins itself, seemed to exist outside of time. The Hawk theatre had operated since 1936 because *of course it did.* George's Cafe on Main Street had been open since time immemorial because *of course it was.* And Steve could work a straight razor because *of course he could.* Billy couldn't help but smirk at his thoughts, his eyes closed, Steve's gentle hand gliding the keen blade over his cheeks.

"Don't smile or I'll cut your lips off," Steve warned him, snorting, wiping the razor on a cloth. "Here— Feel how smooth that is."

He took Billy's hand and guided it to his face. Billy had the vague thought that he could have touched his face without Steve taking his hand, but he ignored this pernicious little voice in favour of the fact that Steve obviously felt like pampering him and seemed to be using any excuse he could find to touch him. Billy wasn't about to complain. His skin was smooth, smoother than he'd felt it since he'd grown facial hair. He understood now why Steve's face had seemed unusually soft all the time.

Steve guided his hand back down to his lap, and gave it a mysterious squeeze that Billy tried not to think too hard about. Something secret had been let out of its box ever since they'd held hands on the Ferris wheel back in early July, and even though Billy could see these confusing but welcome affections heading to a terrifying conclusion, he kept putting it to the back of his mind in the hopes he'd never have to lay it out. He had a feeling Steve knew what was going on but was too afraid to say it.

And Billy was too afraid to ask.

Steve brushed more cream on his face and went back to work, sliding the blade along the flesh of his chin, his neck. He leaned in close as he carefully slid the blade across his neck, holding him still. Billy

barely breathed as he felt the cold metal on his skin. This time last year he would have never, in a thousand years, let someone put a blade against his throat, even Steve. Now... Well. Things were different.

When Steve moved on to his moustache, the last thing to go, Steve told him to bite his lip a little so the skin was taught. He did so, taking his instructions without complaint. The scalp massage and the small shoulder massage had drained out any kind of protests he might have made out of habit. He trusted Steve implicitly. It felt unimaginably good to realize that he felt safe with Steve, that he trusted him completely. Steve shaved off his moustache. After he was done, Billy lifted a finger to feel his upper lip. He hadn't been completely clean shaven in quite a while. He felt strangely younger, like he'd erased the last two years. Steve washed out his gear and put it away. Billy heard the creaking of the floor as he stepped back to admire his work.

"Hey hey!" he laughed. "Looks great!"

Billy half turned toward the mirror. Some vague splotches of colour washed across his vision, like someone had swiped oil across his eyes. "I wish I could see it," he said, snorting. "Now I'll never know what I'd look like if I grew up as a spoiled brat..."

"Well, thankfully it's 1986 and cameras have been invented," Steve said.

"Really?" Billy smirked. "You mean I don't gotta sit here for hours while Robin paints my portrait?"

"You're in luck," Steve chuckled, digging in his bag. "Okay. Pose!"

Billy opened his mouth wide, grinning, his eyebrows shooting to his hairline, giving Steve a goofy thumbs up.

"Fuck you, I don't look like that," Steve laughed, snapping a photo and advancing the film for another one. Steve backed himself into Billy's legs, obviously trying to take a picture of them both.

"How'd that other picture you tried to take of us turn out?" Billy

teased.

“I’ll have you know it turned out perfectly fine— Very minimal thumb. Now, smile.”

Billy reached his chin forward and put his chin on Steve’s head, giving the camera his best devilish smirk. The camera clicked and Steve stepped away. Billy hopped off the counter and reached for the sink, splashing some water on his face to get rid of the last of the shaving cream.

“Okay,” Steve said. “Your turn. I’m at your mercy.”

“Alright, so first you’re gonna shave your nuts—“

“Seriously?”

“I’m just kiddin,’ Steve, relax,” Billy laughed, turning around and leaning against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest. “You’re gonna go wash out Farrah and your fancy shampoo and use the stuff I use.”

“What— Not gonna wash my hair for me? After all the pampering I did for you?” Steve demanded, laughing.

Billy rolled his eyes. “Alright, fine.”

He listened as Steve rinsed his hair. His vision was very poor, but he could sort of navigate by going toward and away from the bathroom light. He tried to remember that healing his eyes would take time, but now that he had a little bit of vision back he was extremely anxious for it all to return. He’d become so used to not being able to see at all that these small inklings of sight were frustrating, making him almost wish he hadn’t even bothered with the surgery.

“Kay, I’m sitting down,” Steve announced, turning off the shower head. Billy heard the squeak of him moving and sitting down against the tub. He walked forward and sat down, crossing his legs, walking his hand along until he found Steve’s head.

“Alright, pass me the shampoo,” he said.

Steve handed it to him, and he doused his palms in it. Then, he threaded his hands into Steve's hair.

"Alright, Steve 'The Hair' Harrington, you ready for me to totally ruin your best feature?"

"So ready," Steve chuckled, completely at ease. He washed Steve's hair, quick and dirty, rough, the way he'd always washed his own. Steve didn't complain, only snorting with laughter when Billy pasted his sudsy hair upward like a Mohawk.

"You do that every time you wash your hair?" Steve asked.

"Not every time," Billy shrugged. "But this time's special, so..."

"Oh, I feel so honoured," Steve smiled.

"You should. You get to be me for a night," Billy said, flattening Steve's hair back down. "Alright. Rinse."

Steve stood up and rinsed. When he was done, he got out of the tub. Billy, leaning against the sink, reached a hand out. "Alright, lemme see..."

His hand found Steve's hair and he ruffled it with both hands, slicking some of it back, pulling a bit of it forward.

"You see the bottle there?" he said, gesturing.

"Yeah."

"Go and spray that in, and then sorta.. Fluff it."

Steve did as he was bid. "How d'you do that curl thing? In the front of your face?" Steve asked.

"C'mere."

He reached out and took a lock of Steve's hair, twirling it around his finger. He held it in place, Steve standing patiently in front of him, waiting for it to dry. After a few moments, he let the lock of hair fall from his fingertips, his hand reaching across Steve's forehead, down

to his cheek, and across his face. He gently tucked a stray bit of hair behind his ear, his fingertips dancing feather light on his smooth skin. Almost inevitably, his hand came to rest along Steve's jaw and landed beneath his chin, his thumb resting delicately beneath his lower lip. The light in the bathroom was bright enough that his world was a vague impression of colours illuminated by the filaments glowing in their frosted glass casings above the mirror. Before him, Steve was smudgy and dark, a shadow upon a shadow. Billy longed to see him again. He could hear the laughter and warmth in his voice when they talked, but he'd never seen Steve's face expressing it, had never been on the receiving end of his smile crinkling his mischievous, kind brown eyes. All the memories he had of Steve before were fuzzy and vague, a deep sense of joy pasted over the image of his sweating brow in the high school gym and over his tense face in the Hawkins Middle parking lot. The image of Steve he had in his head was a layered mirage of what he had known before and the happy sounds and touches he knew now. He was almost afraid of seeing Steve again, as much as he craved it. He had a secret fear that all he'd see in his eyes was kindness instead of love.

"Now you gotta put cologne on your nuts," Billy murmured quietly, forcing himself away from the edge of things unsaid.

"What?" Steve whispered, breathlessly, sounding very far away.

"You gotta put cologne on your nuts," Billy repeated, louder, his hand whipping away from Steve's face. Steve inhaled sharply once, under his breath, and was back from the brink in an instant.

"Ugh," he said, laughing. "Come on man..."

Steve shoved some clothes in his arms.

"Go get dressed."

Billy stepped out of his bedroom, tugging on the navy blue sailor top, trying to get it to cover his lower belly. Steve blinked, raising his eyebrows. They were the same height, but where Steve was muscled in a wiry sort of way, Billy tended towards bulky, and was generally thicker around the chest and arms. He was practically popping out of

the shirt and the shorts hugged his thick thighs. Steve watched in amusement and titillation as Billy took the Scoops Ahoy hat and placed it on his head, putting his hands on his hips and grinning widely.

“How do I look?”

“Like you’re about to shoot a porno,” Steve cackled.

“What kinda porno?” Billy asked, smirking, sliding his tongue along the front of his teeth. He fished out a pack of smokes and a lighter from the pockets of the blue shorts and lit it.

“ *What kind of porno* , he asks,” Steve mocked, snorting. “I’ll be right back.”

He left Billy for a moment and went back to the bathroom, holding up Billy’s red swim trunks stamped with the Hawkins Community Pool emblem. He took off all his clothes and slid them on, tightening them, and looked at himself in the mirror. He inclined his head, flicking a pair of aviators onto his nose and dangling Billy’s lifeguard whistle around his neck. He actually didn’t look half bad. He’d shaved his chest the way Billy did (for why, he’d never understand) and he was looking pretty trim from all his time on his feet at the Family Video. He looked pretty damn good.He left the bathroom and stood in front of Billy in the hall.

“Okay,” he said, grinning at a bulkier, meaner looking version of himself. “We’re ready to go.”

“Mm, not yet,” Billy said, coming a little closer. The light in the hall was dim and he moved cautiously. Steve figured that the introduction of confusing bursts of light into his line of vision was more disorienting than being completely unable to see, which he’d gotten used to. As his vision slowly healed, he seemed to be more clumsy than he’d been in a long time. His hand found Steve’s shoulder then retreated. Billy lifted his hands around his neck and pulled something off of his head, holding it out in front of him.

His medallion.

“Here,” Billy said, around his cigarette.

“Oh—oh,” Steve said, amazed. “Are... Are you sure? I know it was your Mom’s, I don’t wanna lose it...”

“You won’t lose it,” Billy said. He came forward and put it around Steve’s neck, pulling on the medallion so it settled over his bare chest. Steve looked down at it, the metal still warm from sitting so close to Billy’s heart. He swallowed and picked it up tentatively with his fingers, turning it around. The image of the Virgin Mary stamped into the gold was very faded now, but he ran the pad of his thumb over its smooth surface. Then he let it fall and looked up into Billy’s face. He looked calm, smoking, smiling sofltly, his shoulders relaxed, the stupid sailor’s hat sitting on his slicked dirty blonde head. Steve felt himself smiling too, for no real reason.

It just felt good to be trusted.

They drove to Steve’s house. Tina’s parent’s house was only a ten minute or so walk from Steve’s, so they parked and set off walking down the road. As they approached Tina’s, they could hear thumping music issuing from inside the house. The street was lined with cars, and Steve smiled at Harley’s rusty Econoline. He was excited to see her, Robin, and Nancy again. He missed them all terribly. The night was mild for late October, but Steve had thrown on a coat just in case. He’d thank himself later when he was wasted and staggering home in the cold. They walked to get her up the front steps to Tina’s house, and went inside. The music was throbbing as they came through the door, and Steve dutifully led Billy into the living room where he was happy to see Tina, Robin, Harley, Nancy, and a crowd of other people waiting for them. Tina saw them and leapt up, running over to the stereo and turning the knob, the music quickly fading into nothing.

“HAAAAPPY BIIIIRTH-DAY TOOOO YOOOU!” she hollered.

The crowd joined in, and Steve turned to Billy, grinning, starting to sing. Billy’s cheeks flushed, laughing, his hands on his hips, looking down at the floor.

“HAAAPPY BIRTHDAY DEEEAAAR BILL-YYYY! HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU!”

The crowd erupted into applause, whooping and hollering. Steve punched Billy lightly on the shoulder, leaning in. *“And maaaany moooooore!”* he sang in his ear.

Billy sat down on a couch, Steve patting him on the shoulders and handing him a can of Bud. “I’m gonna go find us some more beer,” he said, traipsing off into the crowd. Billy leaned back, enjoying the loud music and chatter all around him. He hadn’t been expecting this to be half a birthday party for him– Tina must have planned this all with Steve. Some of the people in the room were probably just excited to go to a party, but still– It felt good to get fucked up and have a bit of fun in familiar company. He felt someone sit beside him, and turned his head, squinting his eyes. The lights in the room bloomed, blotchy and indistinct, around a vaguely familiar outline.

“It’s Nat,” the person said, reaching out and tapping him on the arm.

Billy smiled, genuinely happy that he’d come to talk to him. Nat was a sweet guy and he’d always felt a little bad for making out with him that one time and then totally blowing him off.

“Hey!” he greeted. “Shit, long time no see— Pun intended.”

Nat laughed. “I’d ask you how you are, but... Obviously you didn’t have a very good year...”

“Yeah, it was... Total dog shit,” Billy snorted, taking a drink of beer. But how was your year?”

“Not bad— Finally got out of that shithole high school. I got accepted to Juilliard, though, so that’s exciting...,” Nat said gleefully.

“Damn, holy shit!” Billy exclaimed, grinning, giving Nat a light punch on the arm. “I remember you said you really wanted to go there...”

“Well— I’m going this spring! New York!”

“Finally gettin’ outta Hawkins, huh?” Billy said, smiling.

“God— I can’t wait,” Nat sighed quietly. “Then I can finally be... Well. You know.”

“Yeah,” Billy nodded, swallowing. He blinked once and leaned in.

“Listen, Nat... There’s that thing going around, killing guys... Makin’ them sick... Promise me you’ll be careful?”

Nat let out a quiet breath and put his hand on Billy’s arm. “I’ll be careful,” Nat said sincerely. “I promise.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Billy felt apart from the fun around him, like he and Nat existed in a world alone, one where fear and sadness reigned. There were many uncertainties in their world, many unanswered questions. Sometimes it felt like they and others like them were being sent an awful and damning message... But he knew that wasn’t true. He knew it wasn’t because their love was perverse. They would be careful, they would endure— and, eventually, one day they would be happy, open, and proud. Billy gently tapped Nat on the knee, moving on to a lighter subject.

“You leavin’ anybody special behind?” Billy asked Nat, taking a drink of his beer.

“No,” Nat snorted. He shifted on the couch. “Though... You and Steve seem close...,” he said demurely, nudging Billy gently.

“Yeah,” Billy agreed, keeping it casual. “We hang a lot. He’s—“

Billy stopped mid sentence, unsure. Was Steve his best friend? He was certainly the person he liked to be around the most. He also knew he felt a little more deeply than what he thought might be friendship, but he wasn’t about to admit that to Nat in a room full of people.

“A good friend,” he finished, shrugging, sipping his beer.

“Hmm!” Nat hummed. Billy could tell just by the sound of his voice that he had figured out what was really going on.

“So,” Nat said, turning his head so his mouth was close to Billy’s ear. “Is Steve uh.... Well, is he… Y’know?”

Billy let out a breath, flopping his head back against the couch, his eyes rolling to the heavens. Nat laughed, choking a little on his beer. Billy turned his head to him, shaking his head.

“Maybe? Shit, man. I think so, yeah, but... I don’t think he knows… Or maybe he just isn’t. I got no fuckin’ clue,” he muttered under his breath.

“Oh Jesus,” Nathan snorted, turning his head away from the crowd, giggling. “Well— Some people know right away and others... Not so much...”

“What’re you two mumbling about over here?” Steve called, coming over, sounding a little on the jolly side. He must have gotten waylaid on his journey to the fridge, and had clearly managed to down a few beers while he was at it.

“Actually, we’re talkin’ about you, Harrington,” Billy snorted, sipping his drink.

“And what’re you saying about me?”

“That you gotta shave that moustache after this party, like, *ASAP,* ” Nathan laughed. “No offence, but... You look really bad.”

“Wow, thanks!” Steve exclaimed sarcastically, giggling. Billy felt a cold beer fall into his lap. “Come on, Billy, I’m already four in. You’re fallin’ behind!”

“So I am,” Billy agreed. He pulled the tab and tilted his head back, guzzling down the alcohol. He was done in record time, crushing the can in his hand and letting out an obnoxiously loud belch.

“Ahhh!” he said, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

“Wow,” Nat snorted teasingly. “Soooo impressive.”

“Hey, it’s no Juilliard, but... It’ll do for Steve,” Billy smirked, turning to Nat and giving him a wink. “Ain’t that right, Steve?”

“Huh?” Steve asked, clearly not paying any attention.

“That’s right,” Billy grinned.

“Oh *fuck!* ” Steve exclaimed, annoyed, grabbing Billy by the arm. “Guess who just got here?”

“Uh... The cops?”

“No,” Steve scoffed. “Tommy fucking Hagen.”

Billy blinked, turning to Nat. “Uh, I gotta deal with this... It was good to talk to ya, though.”

Nat wrapped his arms around Billy, his lips close to his ear.

“I think Steve likes you,” Nat whispered. “Good luck.”

Billy swallowed a lump in his throat. “Good luck, Nat.”

“FORTY FIVE, FORTY SIX, FORTY SEVEN, FORTY EIGHT—“

Robin, dressed in a ragged dark witch’s dress and black and orange striped tights, flung herself off the keg, spitting beer onto Tina’s patio.

“FORTY EIGHT!”

The crowd gathered around her screamed, cheering.

“ We got ourselves a new keg–”

Tommy Hagen looked at Robin, holding up her wrist.

“A NEW KEG *QUEEN!”*

The crowd exploded into cheers, and Steve yanked Billy forward by the hand, toward where Robin and Tommy were standing. Steve and Billy grabbed Robin, throwing her onto their shoulders, raising her up and down in triumph.

“ROBIN! ROBIN! ROBIN! ROBIN!”

“I TOLD YOU I COULD DO IT!” Robin shrieked, pumping her fists in

the air. They walked toward the house where Harley was waiting, screaming by the back door. They knelt and let Robin off of their shoulders, and Harley flung her arms around Robin.

"YOU DID IT, BABE!" Harley screamed over the noise, Nancy at her side, clapping and jumping up and down. Jonathan, red in the face, was pumping his fist in the air, whooping loudly. They helped Robin through the open back door and the crowd followed them back into the house. Flushed and overheated, Steve wanted to stay outside.

"You goin' in?" Steve asked Billy.

"No," Billy said, blowing his hair out of his red face. "I'm fuckin' hot."

"Yeah, same."

Steve hooked his arm through Billy's in a silly kind of way, leading him like a gentleman in a historical movie toward the kegs. Discarded solo cups littered the stone patio, strewn in the bushes and rolling on the stones. The night was cool, tending toward frosty, but the alcohol pumping through his veins and the couple of blunts he'd hit had made the world a little fuzzy and warmer than it actually was. Steve bent and grabbed two new cups from the discarded bag on the ground and got them each one. He looked up and saw Tommy standing beside one of the kegs, alone, drinking, and doing his very best to avoid locking eyes with them.

When he'd arrived earlier, Steve had expected trouble. Instead, he'd just announced that he'd brought kegs and asked Tina where she wanted them. Steve didn't understand why he'd bothered to come at all. They hadn't been close in a long time, and Billy had definitely never been close to him. As far as Steve could tell, Billy had been pretty much a loner. Steve walked up to the keg, as it was the only one still filled and pumped it, pouring beer into his cup and handing it to Billy. He took the empty one from him and filled it.

"Hey," Tommy said, at last.

"Hey," Steve greeted. Beside him, Billy just nodded his head. Unsurprisingly, Billy didn't forgive people as quickly as Steve did.

“Heard you had a surgery,” Tommy said awkwardly.

“Yup,” Billy said, his tone clipped. Steve was quiet, drinking his beer.

“Hope it… Works, or whatever,” Tommy mumbled, scratching the back of his head. Steve decided to come in with some boring conversation grease. Clearly Billy wasn’t going to budge.

“How’s school?” he asked, on the line toward disinterested.

“It’s school,” Tommy shrugged. “Travel a lot for basketball. We’re going to state.”

“Nice,” Steve said. Beside him, Billy shifted on his feet, drinking with a very stony expression. He and Max hadn’t always gotten along, but Steve could tell what Tommy’s brother had done to her had hurt him to the quick. Billy’s hand clenched and unclenched at his hip, anger and frustration flicking in the corner of his mouth. Steve slid his hand down and took his fingers in his own, giving them a squeeze. He knew how Billy felt about Tommy — He was a mirror just as much as he was an enemy. Steve watched as Tommy’s eyes darted down to their hands, then quickly back up again, too contrite to say anything. He could tell that the easy and familiar way Steve held Billy’s hand confused him.

Join the club, Tommy… Steve thought.

“Listen,” Tommy began, licking his lips. “I, uh… My little brother is a dick, and… I’m sorry I was a dick to you guys.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “What made you apologize?”

He was grateful for it, but it still surprised him. He knew Tommy and knew that the only way he would give an apology was if he thought someone he respected had been hurt or offended. And, since Tommy barely respected anybody, Steve hadn’t heard many apologies. Tommy’s face flushed.

“I just… Uh…”

Tommy swallowed hard.

“I kinda...”

Steve leaned in expectantly, giving Tommy a confused look.

“I, uh.... I kinda miss... Talkin’ to you.”

“Kinda miss talkin’ to Steve or to me?” Billy asked bluntly, lighting a cigarette and looking peeved. Steve gently nudged him, annoyed. The guy was trying to apologize. It wasn’t like Billy was an expert at apologies himself, either.

“Both of you, honestly,” Tommy said, clearing his throat, watching Steve’s annoyed elbow with some hope. “I guess I’m just...”

Tommy looked down at his beer. “I’m just sorry.”

Steve’s eyebrows rose to even greater heights toward his hairline. His apology had genuinely surprised him. He hadn’t expected Tommy to ever get to a place where he’d say sorry for the things he’d done. Steve knew that he *was* sorry, and often– But he was too proud to say it, and instead of humbling himself down to an apology he would just forget about whatever hurt he’d caused and moved on. That’s what Steve had done too, for a very long time. There hadn’t been any consequences for either of them so there had never been any point. Maybe something had happened to him, or maybe he’d just started to grow up. Either way, Steve wasn’t so hypocritical as to not accept an apology from someone who used to act the way he did.

“Alright,” Billy said, shrugging, before Steve could say anything. He downed his beer and flicked his empty solo cup onto the patio. Tommy looked at Steve. The patio light by the sliding door was bright under its glass dome, flooding the stone floor of the patio and catching on the shiny plastic of the discarded cups. Steve took a slow sip and watched Tommy’s eyes, wide and open, hoping that Steve could understand, that he would know what he meant. Steve did. They had been best friends since childhood. Tommy was petty and mean, but he supposed it wasn’t any fun being petty and mean alone. At least when they’d been friends, they’d had each other. Steve supposed that maybe now, out in the real world... Tommy was coming to the horrible and thrilling conclusion that the world was bigger than they’d ever thought and was rapidly moving on without

him, and that his life before this was simply a footnote in the grand scheme of things. He was free to become something different, if he wanted to.

“It’s okay,” Steve said. “Just— Don’t be a dick from now on, okay?”

Tommy swallowed, licking his lips. “Ye—Yeah,” he said, nodding vigorously. “Okay.”

“This keg’s dry,” Billy said, smirking a little. “Let’s go in and find something else...”

Steve was feeling fuzzy and warm. His face hurt from laughing and his voice was scratchy from screaming. The lights in the living room were dim from crooked lampshades. The huge crowd packed into Tina’s living room swayed and pulsed. He peered over at the kitchen island where a mess of snacks and liquor was sprawled. Standing near the island was Billy, Robin and Nancy on either side of him, talking animatedly. He smiled fondly as Billy made grand gestures, grinning mischievously, sloshing his beer by accident. Steve could hear Nancy and Robin cackling.

“Who’re you lookin’ at?” Harley called in his ear, her voice a little slurred, pitching forward. They were swaying on the crowded dance floor. Steve looked at her and sipped his beer, shrugging.

“You best not be eyeing my girl,” Harley teased, pushing him lightly on the chest.

“I’d never dream of goin’ after your girl, Harley!” Steve told her, shaking his head. His curled hair tickled his nose and he brushed it back out of habit.

“I know who you were lookin’ at,” Harley said conspiratorially in his ear, leaning back and giggling. She danced away from him and towards Robin, Billy, and Nancy. For an uncomfortable moment he thought that she was going for Nancy, but then she grabbed Billy by the hand and dragged him joyfully out from behind the kitchen counter. Steve’s mouth felt sticky and his face flushed. Was it *that* obvious? He secretly hoped the people at this party weren’t as good

at detecting his secrets like Harley was.

Harley parked Billy in front of Steve, grinning.

“Take care of Steve, Baby Blue! I wanna dance with the girls!” she called, pushing Billy playfully into Steve’s chest. They collided, and Billy laughed, the beer in his cup sloshing over his hand. He started swaying his hips to the music. Steve burst out laughing as Billy brought his hand to his face and licked the beer off. He giggled into the ceiling, holding his drink up in the air. Robert Palmer was blasting on the speakers as they began to sway in time together, rocking on their heels. Billy was inches from him, mirroring him, their faces very close.

“Yoooou’d like to think you’re immune to the stuff, oh yeah!” they bellowed together. *“Closeeeeer to the truth is that you— Can’t get enough, you know you’re gonna have to face it you’re ADDICTED TO LOVE!”*

Steve did two beats of an air drum against Billy’s chest, and he laughed.

“Miiiiiight as well face it you’re addicted to love! ” they sang into each other’s faces. Their bodies nearly touched, cramped together in the crowd. If Steve only reached out, he could have pressed himself against Billy, chest to chest... His drunk mind slid across Billy’s blue eyes and down his torso, wearing the ridiculous blood-stained Scoops Ahoy uniform, the white hat askew atop his blond curls... The shorts hadn’t been kind to him, showing off the embarrassing fact that he had kind of a round butt. On Billy, they hugged his thighs like they’d been painted on.

“Those shorts always made my ass look huge,” Steve yelled in Billy’s ear, laughing, holding up his solo cup.

“Is that a bad thing?” Billy yelled back, grinning.

“I dunno,” Steve snorted, taking a drink. “Is it?”

“No,” Billy cackled. He took his free hand, reached around, and gave his right ass cheek a smart slap. Steve jumped in surprise, knocking

into Billy, his shock halting their synchronized swaying.

“Flaunt it if you got it,” Billy grinned at him, his tongue flicking daringly across his teeth. Steve’s heart skipped several beats, and something delighted and playful roared up in his chest. He grinned back, reaching up, taking back his Scoops hat and putting at a jaunty angle on his own head.

“Aye, aye, sailor,” Steve called. He moved in close, their bodies rubbing together as they swayed. Steve felt electricity humming along his nerves as he downed his beer. He turned his head and Billy’s face was a lot closer then he’d thought, their thighs touching, their arms curled around each other… The cup fell from his fingertips as Billy’s face came in closer...

“Hey boys!” Robin said, pushing her way between them. “Looks like you’re empty, Steve!”

She pressed a cold can of beer into his hands and Billy downed his drink. “Me too!” he called happily, and she handed him one from the pile in her hands. Steve tried to catch her eye, confused, but she wouldn’t look at him. Then, the song changed, and Steve forgot what he’d been upset about. He took Billy’s hand and led him off the dance floor toward the crowd gathering in the back patio to escape the heat of the living room.

Billy opened his eyes, and the dim impression of a soft, distant light shimmered on the edge of his vision. He blinked, lifting his head. His hand curled around the fabric of a blanket, his fingers curled against a warm, bare chest that rose and fell rhythmically in sleep. For a moment he couldn’t remember the last few hours, but then snippets of the evening slowly filtered back through his brain. Tina’s party. His hair was damp, and the air outside of the blanket was chilly. When he moved his body, the soft surface he and the other person were lying on swayed gently. He remembered that Tina’s parents had a swinging bench on their back porch— That must be where he was. He gently shook the person whose chest he’d been lying on, poking them.

“Hnng,” Steve moaned. Billy smiled, sitting up a little, trying to

preserve the body heat between them.

“Hey,” he called. His tongue felt like a dry shag carpet, the taste of flat beer and stale cigarettes in his mouth. The familiar sensation of an oncoming hangover was brewing behind his eyes.

“Hey,” Steve mumbled back. Billy heard him open and close his mouth a few times, smacking his lips. “Ugh... I think we’re sober...”

“Yuh,” Billy sighed, bringing the blanket closer.

“Wait, are we... Outside?” Steve asked, sitting up a little. The bench swayed.

“Yeah.”

“God, no wonder it’s fucking freezing...,” Steve muttered grumpily. He sniffed loudly. “It’s still night out, but I think the party’s over...”

He lifted his feet underneath the blanket. Billy shivered in the damp, cold air and mirrored Steve, bringing his legs up onto the swing. The wicker bench swayed with their movements. Billy could hear the trees rustling above their heads, the chilly night breeze coaxing the last of the autumn leaves off of their branches and down to the ground. The peeper frogs and crickets that had been their constant companions throughout the summer were quiet now, sleeping below the earth. Billy’s head was clearer than it had been, but it was still blurry around the edges. Snippets of the night came back to him in tidbits; pleasant memories of dancing with Steve, with Nancy, with Harley and Robin... Laughing and trying to play games, being kissed on the cheek by buzzed friends and drunk acquaintances...

“Happy birthday,” Steve said, quietly, sounding sleepy and content. He shuffled closer, closing the gap between them, putting his head on Billy’s shoulder and wrapping his arms around him. Billy pulled the blanket up to their chins, his cheeks flushed, a pleased smile winding its way onto his lips.

“No one forgot *your* birthday...,” Steve muttered teasingly. “Not like mine...”

“I’m just cooler than you,” Billy shrugged. “S’not my fault.”

“No way,” Steve said, grinning against his shoulder. “Your days as a cool guy are way over, dude.”

Billy scoffed. “How d’you figure?”

“Hm,” Steve hummed, his lips against Billy’s shirt. He turned his head. “Well... I stopped bein’ cool the second I started giving a shit. And since you give a shit now... You aren’t cool anymore. It’s just science. You give up lookin’ cool if you actually wanna give a shit about stuff.”

Billy laughed. He supposed Steve was probably right.He heard the screen door opening and they both pulled away from each other quickly.

“Hey!” Tina’s voice called out, whispering.

“Oh, hey!” Steve called.

“I wondered where you guys went,” she said, whispering quietly and giggling. “It’s pretty late... Or like, early? I dunno. It’s five - thirty in the morning. A couple of girls stayed, but I’ve been taking care of Tommy. He got a little too drunk... He’s been hurling for like an hour...”

“Oof,” Billy yawned.

“It’s okay,” Tina said nonchalantly. “You guys should come in, it’s cold out here...”

“To be honest, I just wanna go to bed... You wanna walk home, Baby?” Steve asked him teasingly, punching him lightly on the arm.

Billy rolled his eyes at Steve’s use of his old nickname. “Yeah. Thanks Tina, but I think we’re just gonna head home...”

Tina gave them each a hug. Billy thanked her quietly for the party, holding her close, burying his head in her neck, rubbing her back. His brain was slowly succumbing to exhaustion, dehydration, and a killer hangover, but while he still felt semi-functional he wanted to convey to her how much it had meant to him that she’d gone out of her way to do something like this for him. When they’d first started hooking

up, two years ago, it had been mostly just a friendship, one that he'd genuinely enjoyed... But then one day she'd seen Neil slamming him up against a wall. His Dad hadn't known she was there. After that, he'd done what he always did when someone learned his secrets: he ignored them and pushed them away.

He was glad he hadn't totally pushed her away. He thought about Tommy's apology and wondered how such a short time could so drastically change a person. He knew suddenly, in that moment, that they had all changed, had all grown, had all become different and more defined. They'd all started to actually give a shit.

And, if what Steve said was true... Billy felt that it was definitely worth it.

Steve sniffed, wiping his nose with his sleeve. Even through his coat the air was cold and damp. It reminded him of the dawns during his time in Scouts, when the morning birds would wake up as the first light hit the trees and the air would be fresh and icy. He wasn't normally up this late and the pre-dawn silence was something he usually saw from the other side of the day. This was the time he was usually waking to the world, pulling open his blinds, stretching, getting coffee. At his side, Billy yawned loudly, scratching his head, his jacket zipped up tight around his chest. They only had about five more minutes to walk and they would be at the house. The sky was tinting a light greyish blue in the distance. They walked leisurely by streetlight, skipping between orange pools on the asphalt. Steve was holding Billy's hand. They'd pulled their sleeves down to keep their fingers from getting too cold, walking on the left side of the road along the curb. Beyond the curb was a small hill covered in prickling, bare bushes that tumbled down into a dirty drainage river and thin scrub trees. Steve had heard from his mother's gossip that they were finally going to be filling in that side of the road with suburbs soon, though he hadn't seen anything start yet. He was just about to idly tell Billy about it when a car engine came grumbling down the street behind them. Steve dutifully led them closer to the curb away from the approaching car. As it passed them, Steve saw that it was a pickup truck. It passed them slowly. Then, it pulled out from the half-dark over to the side of the road and stopped under a pool of light.

Steve stopped dead, unintentionally clutching Billy's hand in an iron grip. He *knew* that pickup truck. To his horror, the driver's side door opened and a man got out, turning to face them.

Neil Hargrove.

Steve froze, stock still.

"What?" Billy asked sharply, immediately concerned. "What's up, Steve?"

"I—"

Steve swallowed. Neil stared at them from under the street light above him, but his face was too cast in shadow for Steve to be able to make out his expression. The naive and kind part of his brain bleated that maybe Neil was here to apologize to his son, that maybe he'd gotten better... But the realistic part of his brain knew there was no way in hell that that was the case.

"Steve?" Billy demanded, alarmed. Steve startled and looked at him, his mind racing, trying to think of a way to escape.

"We gotta go, right now," Steve said urgently, tugging on Billy's hand, turning around. They'd run back to Tina's.

"Where the *fuck* do you think you two little faggots are going?" Neil bellowed across the street.

Billy stopped dead, his back to his father, becoming still as a statue. Neil strode across the street and when he came into view under their street lamp, Steve took a deep breath and turned around.

He looked *bad.* His face was lined and waxy looking, his eyes sagging and rimmed in red. A sour and unpleasant smell clung to him like a cloying perfume. His clothes were dishevelled, his face covered in a 5 o'clock shadow. His lips were turned in a snarl.

"Hey," Neil called out, his voice hitching in a strange way, like he was having a hard time getting words out. "I'm talking to you, you piece of shit."

With extreme grace, Billy turned his head slightly to the left.

“What do you want?” Billy asked, his voice low and venomous.

Neil scoffed. “What do you want, he says... You hear that, Harrington? What do you want...”

Steve stood his ground, crossing his arms, saying nothing.

“Do you remember when we had our little conversation about responsibility and respect?” Neil hissed quietly, his eyes like hot coals staring into the back of his son’s head.

“No,” Billy said, turning fully around. “I don’t remember.”

His face was expressionless, cold. Steve looked between them, ready to fight or run, whichever came first.

“You disobeyed me,” Neil whispered, stepping forward threateningly. “And you know what happens when you disobey me...”

Billy’s cold poise was shattered, his face going white, his mouth parting in alarm. He reached out for his father, as if to stop him. Steve blinked, confused.

“I break things,” Neil snarled, turning to the side. Suddenly, Steve felt Neil’s fists twisting the front of his coat, dragging him forward. Steve lifted his arms, yelling out incoherently, trying to wrench Neil’s grip off of him, but he had gotten the element of surprise. Steve was thrown to the pavement, the air leaving his lungs in a whoosh. He gasped. Then, a fist collided with his cheek, cracking his head onto the pavement. Steve kicked his leg up and wrenched his body to the side, seeing stars, and managed to throw Neil off of him. He scrambled to his feet and wound up a punch, cracking Neil on the jaw. Hissing and wincing, he flicked his hand and made another fist, but Neil suddenly threw his entire body weight into him. Steve was almost knocked to the ground, off balance. Neil cracked him across the temple, across the jaw, and then... Across the nose.

Steve cried out, the bones cracking, blood pooling in his mouth. He spat and tried to hit Neil again, but his fists were weakening, his muscles slow to respond. Neil’s fist cracked across his face again,

once, twice, three times, manically throwing blows. Steve felt his consciousness slipping. His face felt like a thousand unfitting puzzle pieces that had been brutally smashed together. He felt drool and blood flying down his chin. He had a hazy view of Neil's face, through one eye, illuminated by the orange street light. He looked monstrous, a small trickle of blood running from one of his nostrils. He thought, in that moment, that there could be nothing more evil, nothing more vengeful, nothing more ugly, than this man. Both Billy and Steve had seen monsters, seen their compulsion to kill and destroy, but it could not compare to the fear and loathing in Neil Hargrove that was so petty and revoltingly human.

He felt Neil's fist hit his face one last time, a vindictive and powerful slug. He felt hands on his coat, his leg colliding painfully with the concrete curb lining the embankment. He was thrown into it, sliding along leaves, twigs, and rocks, the bare brush scraping his clothes and skin. He felt himself roll onto his side, coming to a sudden halt when a tree trunk stopped his fall with a clunk to the top of his skull. Everything was in darkness. He couldn't see anymore. He heard Billy's screaming, and he fought to be awake, willing with all his might for his muscles to obey him; but it was no use. The oncoming darkness was unstoppable. He moved his lips, crying out, his voice muffled from the blood that poured onto his tongue.

"Billy..."

Then, he knew nothing.

Billy heard a deafening crack and listened with horror as Steve's body careened away, leaves and sticks snapping as his body fell. He screeched Steve's name, feeling so unbelievably helpless he felt he might combust into flames. He surged forward, toward where he heard Steve call his name weakly, not caring if he tripped or fell. Every single fibre of his being willed him to go to Steve, to make sure he was alright. Strong hands stopped him in his tracks, cruel vice grips that dug into his flesh like claws. The thumbs of his father's fingers pressed just below his neck, itching to choke him. He felt Neil breathing heavily into his face, the sour smell of liquor and tobacco setting fire to his nostrils. A deep fury raged in Billy's gut and he held himself still.

“I should have killed you when I had the chance,” Neil whispered.

It occurred to Billy that Steve might be dead or dying. Sweet Steve, kind Steve, who had taught him to love again, might very well be breathing his last among the discarded trash and rotting leaves of a dirty roadside, and this man, this monster, who had the audacity to call himself his Dad, would’ve been the reason. Billy’s desperation burned up into furious loathing.

He raised his fist, wound it up, and punched.

He felt his fist collide with the temple of Neil’s forehead, sending him scrabbling away.

Billy pressed on, tripping slightly on something, but righted himself and kept going, toward the noise of Neil getting to his feet. He walked morosely, staunchly, forward. He heard his Dad bellow like a crazed animal and he stepped sideways out of the way. He was hit on the arm, the punch throbbing painfully, but now he knew where Neil was. Billy grabbed him, feeling nothing, a clinical, detached interest overtaking him.

He punched. He punched again. He heard Neil cry out, writhing to get away, but Billy’s will was made of iron and love, and Neil’s was made out of cowardice. He punched one final time, his father crying out. Billy heard Neil let out a little sob and felt a strange, dispassionate sense of disappointment. Only a few hits to the face and Neil Hargrove fell to blubbering like he’d never been hurt in his entire life? Pathetic. Billy had endured *fifteen years* worth of violence.

He yanked Neil forward, breathing into his face, his hands gripping into his father’s shoulders as he had done to him not moments ago.

“If you come near me or my loved ones ever again, I will kill you. Understand?” Billy said, emotionlessly.

“Fuck you!” he father bellowed, trying to wrench himself away from Billy’s grip.

“Say it,” Billy said, holding on tighter. “Say you understand.”

His father only screamed and kicked like a wild animal. Billy

supposed he shouldn't be surprised— That's all his father was, in the end.

He pushed Neil to the pavement, falling on him like a wolf to an injured deer, pressing his knee onto his chest, putting his face into Neil's, almost nose to nose. He put his hand over his father's throat, the way he had done so many times to squeeze a confession or an agreement from him.

"Say it," he whispered.

"I under—stand," his father choked.

"What was that? I couldn't hear you," Billy said quietly.

"I understand," Neil said loudly, his voice constricted.

Billy leaned his head back and stood. He didn't care what Neil did now. He needed to find Steve.

He turned and walked, hoping he would come to the curb. He did, his shoe hitting it. He stepped over. Behind him, he heard Neil getting up off the ground, sniffling.

"You're just like her," Neil garbled at him, his words slurred, half sobbing. "You're just like that goddamn bitch… Just like her…"
Billy flared his nostrils, blood trickling down his face and said nothing, waiting for retaliation. Instead, he heard the sound of Neil staggering back to his truck, the door opening and slamming, the engine roaring to life, and the screech of its tires on the pavement as he drove off.

Alone, Billy began to cry. A choking, mourning sob tore through his chest as he stumbled his way down the roadside.

"Steve!" he screamed, lumbering through the underbrush. "Steve!"

His foot caught on something, and he fell forward onto his chest, gasping in pain. He could barely breathe for crying, getting shakily to his hands and knees, crawling forward, reaching out desperately.

"Steve," he choked, his face contorted, bawling into the sky like his

name was a prayer, “Steve...”

His hand touched the suede of a sneaker. He cried out, climbing his hands along the skin and fabric of a body until they reached a face. Billy shuffled forward, on his knees, and wrapped his arms around Steve’s motionless frame, one of his arms curling behind Steve’s neck, the other clutched over his belly. He put his forehead to Steve’s forehead, smelling that stupid Farrah Fawcett smell of roses that clung to his hair and iron tang of blood from his nose. He could feel faint breaths coming from his open mouth, his chest rising and falling very gently. Billy let out a moan of relief, his face soaked.

“Wake up,” he begged. “Come on, Steve... Wake up. You gotta wake up.”

He slid his fingers across Steve’s belly and took his hand, his other hand finding his face. He shook him gently. “Come on, Steve...,” he wept, his voice choking. “Please wake up. Please... I... I can’t do this without you, I need you... Please, I love you...”

The confession came from him unbidden, but he didn’t give a shit. It was the truth. If Steve heard it, then so be it. “Please...”

He couldn’t speak anymore. There was nothing else to be said. He sat there, freezing cold in the woods, clutching Steve’s bleeding body, and grieved. An eon passed.

Then—

“Mmmmgnnn,” Steve groaned.

Billy gasped, his hand clutching the side of Steve’s face.

“Steve?” he demanded, his throat thick with tears.

“B... Billy?” Steve managed, sounding like he had cotton balls in his mouth.

“Yeah! Yeah, I’m here! It’s me,” Billy called frantically, sniffing, his voice hitching. A desperate, relieved smile crack onto his face.

“Hnnng,” Steve groaned. “Ugh... I feel… Real bad...”

“You’re gonna be okay,” Billy gasped. “Oh fuck… You’re gonna be okay, I promise… *Jesus Christ* … We’re gonna be okay…”

“I think… M’gonna… Throw up…”

Billy scrambled upright onto his knees and helped Steve roll over, who heaved and vomited into the soggy leaves. He gasped, spitting, and leaned back. Billy’s freezing hands clenched onto his jacket, holding onto him like he might disappear if he let go. He reached a hand out and gently touched Steve’s face. Warm blood pooled from a swollen lip, a brutalized nose, a puffy eye. He swallowed loudly, licking his lips.

“We… We gotta get out of here,” Billy said, the chilly morning air piercing into his lungs. “Come on…”

He stood and helped Steve stand, throwing his arm over his shoulders, hauling them upright. “You gotta lead us,” he told Steve, breathing heavily.

They stumbled slowly through the thorny, tangled underbrush. It scraped their legs but they ignored it, clamouring their way awkwardly up the embankment and back onto the pavement. Steve muttered some directions around his swollen lip and broken nose, and Billy dragged them along. Five minutes later they were lumbering through the back sliding door to the basement. Once inside, Billy shut the screen door behind them. They came to the middle of the room and Steve sank down to sit on the thick carpet, and Billy went with him.

“Mom n’ Dad r’ leafin’… Wait a min’t…” Steve mumbled around his fat lip, sniffing and hissing in pain. “I don’ wan’ worry ‘em.”

Billy listened as he heard quiet conversations from upstairs, some dishes clinking in a sink, some shuffling, and then the front door slamming shut.

He helped Steve up wordlessly, feeling grateful that Steve thought of him highly enough to want to save him any embarrassment explaining that he was related to someone as bad as Neil. He helped Steve up the stairs, heading for the kitchen. Suddenly, the front door

opened and Billy heard a gasp. They froze on the stairs. Billy heard the door slam shut and a pair of heels slamming across the carpet toward them.

“Oh my God, what happened?” Sandra Harrington demanded in alarm.

“I jus’ got in-oo a figh’ Mom,” Steve explained lightly, almost jokingly.

“Again?” Sandra asked, exasperated. She took some of her son’s weight and helped Billy take him to a kitchen chair, sitting him down in it.

“Oh, y’know, jus’ some guy bein’ a dick,” Steve shrugged. Billy let go of him and stood back, crossing his arms awkwardly.

“Steven Richard!” Sandra scolded angrily. “How many times are you going to get into a fight like this? This is the fifth time! You have to learn to walk away! Now what’re you going to do? You can’t go into work looking like this!”

“Mom, e’ was a dick! An’ he attacked me!” Steve cried defensively.

Billy shifted from foot to foot, feeling sick. He licked his lips. “It was my Dad,” he confessed, in a rush.

Steve and Sandra went silent. A few very uncomfortable moments passed and then he felt a small pressure on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry... What did you say?” Sandra asked him quietly.

“My... My Dad,” Billy said, turning his face toward the floor. He was exhausted, his head hurt, his eyes burned, and he felt like he might cry any moment from sheer relief and stress. He swallowed and continued. “He’s divorcing my step Mom... I live with her, and... He’s... He ain’t…”

Billy couldn’t bring himself to say what Neil was to this woman he barely knew, but he ploughed on.

“Steve was protectin’ me,” he explained. “And he was protectin’ me

back in March, too."

Sandra's hands were on both of his shoulders now, and he could almost feel Steve's eyes burning into the side of his head.

"Oh," said Sandra, her voice a little high. "Well... Well!"

For the next half hour, Sandra fixed Steve's face, patching him up as best as she could. Once she was sure he didn't have a concussion, she left with the request that he eat something once he woke up. The entire time she patched up her son, she kept touching Billy gently on the arm as she moved past him. At first it confused him, but then he realized what she meant by it; he didn't need to explain to her what he'd been going through. She knew. The evidence of it was plain on her son's broken face. When they were finally alone, in Steve's room, the exhaustion he'd been holding back hit him like a ton of bricks and he laid down beside Steve in bed, shuffling down under the covers, his eyes burning from crying and lack of sleep.

"Why'd you tell her?" Steve asked him. Lying on his side, Billy forced open his heavy eyelids and put a hand on Steve's chest.

"People should know what he's like," Billy said, sniffing. "And… You should get credit for always savin' my ass... You fuckin' hero."

Steve snorted softly and placed his hand over Billy's where it lay on his chest. He lifted Billy's hand to his lips and kissed his fingers gently.

"That's me," Steve said quietly, smiling as best he could as Billy's eyelids closed and the world began to fade into sleep. "Your fuckin' hero."

19. "Dancing in the Dark" - Bruce Springsteen (1984)

November 8th, 1986

Billy watched, smirking, as Steve kicked up brown leaves with his sneakers as they walked along a forest path, the bare trees above their heads creaking in a chill breeze. The temperature had dipped quickly in the week since Halloween, and the leaves had finally lost their battle with the wind and rain that had torn through the town of Hawkins over the last few days. It was dry today, but the sky above their heads was an endless iron grey.

"Allllll the leaves are broooown," Steve sang loudly, tilting his head back and forth.

"All the leaves are brown, " Billy harmonized in a ridiculously low voice.

"And the sky is grey," Steve sang more aggressively, grinning, elbowing Billy in the side.

"And the skyyy is greeeey —Oof!"

"If you're gonna do the harmony then at least actually harmonize," Steve admonished teasingly.

"I'll harmony you," Billy threatened lightly, lifting his head and looking up into the sky.

"California dreaaaamin,'" Steve sang at Billy, stepping ahead and turning around, walking backwards, his heels sliding along the gravel, grinning foolishly. *"Califoooornia dreaaaamin, on such a winter's daaaay..."*

Steve fished one of his hands from out of his pocket and hit Billy gently on the chest with the back of his palm. Billy smirked, his hands buried in the warmth of his jacket, and was thrilled to see that he was beginning to be able to make out a few fuzzy details. He could see the impression of Steve's brown eyes staring warmly at him, like everything around him was faded and he was focusing on him and

only him. His checkup a few days ago with Dr. Owens had gone well. According to him, his vision was back to about half, and was improving at a good and steady pace. If he was lucky, his sight would be the best it would get by Christmas. It would never be what it was, but… If the truth were told, he'd always needed glasses. His Dad had never felt the need to spend money on glasses for him since they'd only been for reading, and his Dad hadn't really cared if his son could read well or not. The shadows and splotches of colour had been frustrating and almost painful, but now that he could make out people's faces if they came close enough, it was much easier to bear. Despite how impatient he felt, he was secretly relieved that it was taking a while to come back. He hadn't felt all that comfortable with crowds in the last while, and suddenly being able to see again would've probably been overwhelming. He was a changed person. He preferred to take things a lot slower than he used to. He was just happy Steve was willing to go at this slower pace without complaint.

"How's your nose?" Billy asked, wincing sympathetically as Steve spun back around and laced his arm through his.

"It's fine," Steve shrugged. "It's… Well. It's gonna be crooked now, officially. Just a little."

Billy swallowed hard, guilt sloshing up like nausea in his belly.

"Jesus…," he mumbled, looking down. "I'm… I'm sorry."

He wouldn't have a crooked nose if he hadn't met Billy. He felt unbelievably guilty that he himself had been directly responsible for one of the hits that had led him here. Billy stopped on the pathway, and Steve looked at him questioningly. Billy lifted a hand and traced his fingers along his nose, feather light so as to not hurt him.

"Hey, it's not so bad," he murmured. "Just a little crooked. Suits you."

Steve snorted softly under his hand as it explored his face. Billy could see it better than he had in a year but he still felt like he was most confident with touch.

"Always liked your nose," Billy muttered before he could stop

himself. He took his hand back and swallowed, starting to walk determinedly down the gravel path and dragging Steve with him, who laughed incredulously, catching up.

“Really?” Steve asked, amazed.

“Yeah,” Billy said, shrugging. “S’nice.”

“It’s pretty fuckin’ big…”

“It’s nice. I like it.”

A pause.

“Okay,” Steve agreed eventually, his voice soft. “Hey— Thanks. That’s… Thanks.”

Billy swallowed, licking his lips, and changed the subject.

“So, for what reason exactly are we walkin’ in the freezin’ fuckin’ cold in the middle of the woods?” he asked.

“I dunno,” Steve shrugged. Billy blinked and looked to the side. He kept forgetting he could look at people when they talked now. Steve was smiling. He turned his face toward him and his brown eyes were so warm Billy thought he might actually feel warmer just by looking at them.

“I dunno,” Billy repeated, mocking. “What d’you mean, ‘I dunno’?”

“Do I have to have a reason?” Steve asked, the corner of his lip lifting, his eyebrows furrowed in humour.

“Guess not... You know, I’ll never fuckin’ get you Indiana people. It’s freezing fuckin’ cold and you guys just don’t even give a shit. Like— Yeah, let’s go swimming in October, who cares. You’re all aliens.”

“Eeeee Teeee phooone hoooome,” Steve said in a cracking, high pitched voice, sticking out his finger and poking Billy in the cheek.

Billy snorted and jerked his head away. Steve laughed.

“I dunno, man,” Steve continued. “I’ve just been workin’ all the time and stuff, so...”

“Awww,” Billy said, grinning. “D’you miss me, Harrington?”

“Not as much as you miss me,” Steve said, raising his eyebrows and grinning. “I know you sit by the phone all day waiting for me to call.”

“Psh, you’re worse than Robin and Nancy.”

Eventually, they came across a lake and Steve extracted himself from Billy’s side, walking down to the water’s edge and kneeling. He picked up a stone and ran it over his fingers.

“You ever skip rocks?” he asked.

“Jesus, what year is it? 1940?” Billy laughed, coming over to stand by Steve on the wet, shallow beach. “Nothin’ to do in Hawkins but skip rocks and play with hula hoops?”

“Sounds like someone sucks at skipping rocks,” Steve said, standing and flicking his wrist. The rock flew across the surface of the water, and Billy heard it skim four times across the surface.

“Four,” Steve said, putting his hands on his hips challengingly.

“Oh, you’re goin’ down,” Billy said, bending. He shuffled a few rocks in his fingers until he found a relatively flat one. He drove his arm back and chucked it.

Plunk.

Steve burst out laughing, slapping him on the back.

“Wow,” he wheezed.

“That was just a warmup,” Billy said, smiling, undeterred. He crouched down and searched for another stone. Steve joined him.

“You know this place is technically shaped like a heart,” Steve informed him, laughing softly, adjusting his stance on the rocky

shore.

“Or a ball sack,” Billy said, smirking, rolling a smooth stone over his fingers. It was flat and a good thickness. It would do.

“A *ball sack?”* Steve exclaimed, wrinkling his nose. “What the fuck do you mean, a ball sack?”

“If you turn a heart upside down it looks like a set of nuts,” Billy shrugged, standing up and winding back his arm. He flicked the rock from his fingers and it sailed across the water... And plunked down into the depths with a definite, sad plop.

“I’m gonna think that every time I see a heart now, thanks,” Steve snorted. He flicked his wrist aggressively and the rock flicked across the water one, two, three, four, five times. “Five,” Steve added on.

Billy shook his head, searching for another rock. He found one after a few moments, and took a few seconds to adjust himself. He threw it.

It skimmed once off the top.

“Hey, better!” Steve called out encouragingly, walking with his back bent along the shore, searching for another stone. Billy watched his silhouette moving along the water, the rocks clicking together as his sneakers slid along them. He picked up a rock and came over back into Billy’s realm of sight.

“Here, try this one,” he said, handing Billy a stone. Billy took it, rolling it in his hands. He stood, cranking his arm back behind him, about to throw it, when Steve stood and put a gentle hand out to stop him.

“Here,” he said softly, coming up behind him, pressing his chest against Billy’s back. He reached a hand out, covering the back of Billy’s hand with his own, moving his fingers along the flat surface of the stone.

“Grip it like that,” Steve explained softly in Billy’s ear. “In the crook of your thumb and your index finger...”

Steve coaxed him down into a crouched position, his head sitting

lightly on his shoulder.

“Then, you wanna get low... So you’re kinda like… On the same level as the water...”

Billy felt like he was on fire. Steve, holding his hand, pulled his arm back, miming the motion of the throw.

“You want it to be quick, like a flick— You want it to stay flat and not spin.”

He guided Billy’s hand, making the flicking motion.

“Okay,” Steve said, letting his hand fall from Billy’s, but keeping himself close behind him, his lips hovering tantalizingly close to his ear. “Try it now.”

Billy felt like his brain was mush, like his muscles had atrophied, like he would melt down into the lake and dissolve. He blinked hard and tried to clear his head.

Low to the ground. Quick. Flick of the wrist.

The stone sailed over the water and skipped once, twice, three times. He grinned.

“There you go!” Steve said happily. “Much better. You’ll be kicking my ass in no time.”

Steve stood and stepped away, going to look for more stones to throw. Billy stayed crouching on the quiet edge of the lake, listening to the water trickle up and over the stony beach. In the tree above their heads, a bird trilled. He looked and watched the colours of Steve’s figure bending, his hair falling down attractively into his face.

“I never been here before,” Billy observed, looking out across the water. The world beyond the length of his fingers was like a blurred watercolour painting, an impression of colour and light.

“Oh, really?” Steve asked, surprised. “It’s a pretty popular make out spot. It’s called Lover’s Lake, cause of the heart... Or, y’know, the

ballsack if you're gross."

"Lover's Lake," Billy repeated, blinking slowly. "Huh..."

He watched as Steve skipped a stone and turned around to grin triumphantly at him.

"Six that time!"

Billy smiled at him.

November 12th, 1986

Max slid her sneaker along the ground, the rubber sliding against the bumpy asphalt as her left foot balanced on her skateboard. It was unseasonably warm for early November, the bright sun warming the dying grass and bare trees. The gentle breeze that fluttered through his hair was cool, but not unbearably so. She'd worked up a bit of a sweat, trying to do a kickflip on her board, the zipper of her green track jacket open and flapping behind her as she leapt up. The board clattered sideways, landing on its back and she swore loudly.

"Hey!"

Max looked up and saw Billy coming out of the house, sitting on the front porch, a black canvas jacket wrapped around his shoulders. He lit a smoke.

"Hey," Max called back. She flipped her skateboard back on its wheels and pushed off, sailing down the street and then curving dramatically in a circle back around toward the house, trying to ease some of the tension out of her limbs from almost falling so often. She slid to a stop at the end of the concrete walkway and mounted her board again, bending her knees, sliding her toe into position and jumping. She missed completely and fell onto the pavement in a heap, her back slamming against the road and her board sliding sideways.

"Fuck!" she swore loudly.

"You good?" Billy called out to her.

“Yes,” she groaned, getting up slowly and picking up her skateboard.

“Somethin’ wrong with your board?”

“No, I mean... It’s fine, it’s just getting a little old,” she said, setting it right again and standing on it.

Billy stood, letting his cigarette fall onto the concrete walk and crushing it with his shoe.

“Wait here,” he said, and ran back into the house.

Max watched him go, putting her foot down, her other foot on her board, her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. What was he doing? A minute later Billy came out of the house clutching something, closing the screen door behind him.

“Here,” he said, showing it to her. It was a brand new skateboard. It still had the tags on it and everything.

“Wha— Where’d you get that?” she demanded, wide eyed. He went down the concrete walk and held it out.

“It was supposed to be for Christmas, but whatever,” he shrugged.

She took the new board and turned it over. It was *nice.* It probably hadn’t been cheap.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she laughed, turning it over. It had a fun decal of blue waves and surfboards on the deck.

“If I told you I’d have to kill you,” Billy said, smirking. He gestured to her. “Here— gimme your old one.”

“Okay?”

Max handed him her old board, smiling. He took it by the trucks, walking out a little further onto the road.

“Mall grabber,” Max sassed. He gave her a look.

He let the board drop, putting one of his sneakers on the end. Then

he hopped up on it and pushed off, gliding down the road, leaning dramatically, turning in a sharp circle. When he came around again, he dipped down low, and then leapt up— the board flipped beneath him as he came down to earth and landed on it, a little unsteadily, but still rolling.

“Woo!” Max cheered, amazed. “I didn’t know you could skate!”

He stopped his board and picked up, turning to her and shrugging. “You never forget.”

She grabbed her new skateboard and went out to meet him. “Wanna go down the road?”

“I can see better than I could, but I dunno if that’s a good idea,” he snorted.

“Aw, no, come on! I’ll lead you!”

“Jesus— Alright,” he sighed, shaking his head. He got his board ready, his foot on the front, and Max did the same.

“Hey! You ride goofy!” Max laughed, looking down at his worn sneakers.

“Yeah,” he said, laughing jokingly. “Left handed... Left footed... Goofy... Can’t fuckin’ write without ruining it... Life’s hard. I’m a left handed man in a right handed man’s world...”

“Oh, shut up,” Max said, smiling rolling her eyes. She took his hand, their backs facing one another. “Alright, you ready?”

“Yup.”

“Let’s go!”

They both pushed off and rolled down the street. As the road went on, there was a slight incline, a little hill that Max had cruised down more times than she could count. They picked up speed, weaving. Max turned her head to the side and watched Billy’s dirty blonde hair in the wind, his bangs fluttering over his forehead, a tiny smile on his face. He was always acting so tough, always pretending like he didn’t

like things... But she could tell he liked *this* , the swaying of the boards, the unseasonably warm weather. They bent down in tandem, pushing their weight into the skateboards, trying to pick up speed. Eventually, they were going fast enough that they didn't have to push. Her new board was a little stiff, but it was nice... She thought back to when he had broken her skateboard the first week that they had been in Hawkins, snapping it over his knee in a fit of rage. She had always disliked Billy, but she had never been afraid of him. When he had grabbed her arm in the car, when he had snapped her board... *That* was when she had begun to fear him. *That* was when she knew he was slowly becoming like his Dad.

But, as inevitable as it seemed back then, it hadn't happened. He'd changed— For the better.

"Okay— Stop," she called out, dragging her foot along the pavement. His reaction was a little delayed, and he spun out a bit beside her, tripping on the board. He jumped and righted himself.

"Yeah— Breaking was never my thing," he told her, smirking, reaching out a foot and dragging the board toward him.

"Yeah… I don't think 'stop' is in your vocabulary..." Max giggled.

They grabbed their boards and decided to walk home. Max held hers under her arm, and Billy swung her old one by his side, holding onto the trucks. She'd seen him surfing once, when they were younger. What she'd seen today was a lot like that, a person lost in the wind, the air... Weaving and cruising and rejoicing in motion. She had done a lot of thinking about her brother in the past year. The person who was walking beside her holding her old skateboard was someone she knew had always been there, but was buried by a lot of hurt and heartache. Even when she thought back to the first week they had been in this town, she couldn't fathom even the little ways he had changed towards her after Will had been taken by the Mind Flayer. Sure, she'd told him off, threatened him— But something else had happened, something that had made him a little softer, and she had no idea what it was. If anything, the Mind Flayer taking hold of him, blinding him, hurting him... It should have made him angry. It should have made him worse.

But it didn't.

"What you thinkin' about?" he asked her.

"You," she said simply.

"What's there to think about?"

"A lot."

Billy rolled his eyes. "Not likely. There's not a lot goin' on in this head, I promise."

"Yeah right," she snorted. "That's such horse shit. You pretend to be dumb but I know you're not."

"Well— I'm not smart."

"You're super smart," Max countered. "And that's not a compliment, it's a fact. You play up this meathead personality but I know how well you did in math. I found your report card in the trash before you graduated."

"Well, then you saw I barely passed English and history."

"Doesn't matter. You're good at math."

"Yeah, and that's about it," he said, shaking his head. "If you got a point…"

"I dunno," Max mumbled. She really didn't have a point. She just felt like Billy was too hard on himself and she didn't know how to get him smiling again like he was when they were cruising down the street. She swallowed and changed track.

"So— What'd you do with Steve last night?"

"Oh, we just watched a movie… *The Terminator,* " Billy smirked. "You know… " *I'll be back."*

"It's still weird to me you and Steve are so close," she said, shrugging.

“I mean… Me too, I guess.”

“He’s been really nice to you,” she observed. She didn’t really get why Steve had decided that Billy was gonna be his friend after everything, but she was glad he had.

“Yeah,” Billy said, his voice ever so slightly soft. “He has. He’s been real nice.”

Max looked over at him and her eyes widened. He was smiling at the ground, his whole face tender, and suddenly, she saw it.

Happy screams.

She’d seen it on Steve’s face, the tenderness, the openness… It had been there, in the parking lot of the A&W, but she hadn’t realized just how much love was really there.

But that couldn’t be… Billy wasn’t… He didn’t…

Did he?

“Billy,” she whispered, stopping in her tracks on the way up the front steps to their house.

He stopped dead, turning his head, his eyebrows furrowing in concern. “Woah, what’s up?”

“I… Billy…,” she sputtered, unable to form the question. She looked around nervously, but they were alone. The street was deserted, their only company a calico cat strutting across a nearby yard and a few starlings chirping in the tall poplars that edged the train tracks.

“What?” he demanded.

“Do you… Are you…”

She licked her lips, leaning in. “Are you… *Gay?”*

“What the fuck? No! I like girls!” Billy protested, alarmed.

Max bit her lip. “Yeah, but… I just… Do you like guys?”

“No!”

“I think you do,” she whispered.

“What— What the fuck?” Billy said, laughing a little too loudly. “Yeah, good one, Max.”

“Billy…”

“Seriously, pull the other one.”

“Billy.”

He stopped. He rubbed his face. *“Shit,”* he swore softly.

Max was floored. She felt like some part of him that she had been missing was being dragged out into the light, some part of him that Neil had hated beyond reconciliation, something that made him unlovable in his own father’s eyes. The amount of times that Neil had called Billy a faggot danced around in her head and she felt sick.

“Billy?” she asked tentatively.

He sat down heavily on the front step, his knees bent, his eyes closed. He leaned her old skateboard beside him on the walk. A pained expression had come onto his face, like he had hit a bruise, wincing. He dug out a pack of cigarettes from the front of his shirt and took one out, going through the familiar motions of lighting it. Max stood near, shifting from foot to foot, swallowing hard, holding her board under her arm. She sat down beside him on the step, setting her board down gently, wrapping her arms around her knees. Her hair fluttered in her face and she tucked it behind her ears. Her heart was hammering in her chest. Billy’s head was turned away as he smoked, tapping his cigarette into the grass, sniffing. When he finally looked at her, he had tears in his eyes.

“Okay,” he said thickly. “Fine.”

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, licking his lips.

“ *I’m* the reason we moved here from L.A.,” he said, his voice low and full of anguish. “Yeah, Neil wanted to get away from your Dad and

all that... But the real reason?"

Billy's jaw clenched.

"The real reason is because... He caught me. Dad caught me with a— a guy," Billy confessed, his voice breaking. "He... He was sick of hearing from your Dad, and he was sick of me gettin' in trouble, and then he found me— Making out with this— This guy— And..."

Billy hung his head. He swallowed several times, almost unable to speak.

"So," he said, eventually, rubbing his nose with his thumb. "That's... That's why we're here, in his shit hole. It's my fault. It's all my fault..."

"Billy...," Max whispered, tears springing to her eyes.

"It was the night you ran away," he said, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. "That night you saw me and Neil had hurt me real bad?"

"He cut your eyebrow," Max stated quietly, her eyes wide, fidgeting with a hole in the knee of her jeans. She remembered.

"Yeah," Billy sniffed. "He was punishing me. I thought it was safe, I thought he wasn't home... I'm so fucking stupid."

Billy crumpled in on himself. He bent his head, wrapped his arms around his knees, buried his face into the sleeves of his shirt, and began to cry. Max felt frozen to the porch, her heart breaking. She didn't know what to say. She was shocked. Then, like a torrent, she was furious. She leapt from the step to her feet and pulled Billy's head into her chest, flinging her arms around him and putting her chin on his shoulder. Hot, angry tears drained down her face as she stared unseeingly at the front door behind him. The day back in L.A. that she'd walked in and found Billy bleeding, crying out like a hurt dog, he'd screamed at her to leave him alone. She'd been terrified. That was why she had run away, in the end. On that day she'd seen what Neil was, and she'd been too scared to live with him anymore.

Now... She was pissed. Every part of her brother that had tried to be

loving, be good, be truthful to who he was had been blotted out in blood and hatred. Neil had wanted to craft Billy in his image, wanted him to be a thing of rage and cruelty— and he'd almost succeeded. Max was amazed and so grateful that he hadn't. She held onto him tighter, her eyes squeezing shut, big fat tears rolling down her cheeks. Slowly, her anger faded to a delayed sort of sadness. She wished that they had been able to trust each other sooner. She buried her head in his neck, letting out a few sobs that she couldn't stop.

After a while, Billy nudged her.

"What're you cryin' for?" Billy croaked, laughing quietly. "You're not the one who fucked everything up."

"Don't... Stop it," Max mumbled into his neck. "You didn't fuck it up."

"I mean— I sorta did—"

"No you didn't!" Max said forcefully, turning her head onto Billy's shoulder. "You didn't! Neil fucked everything up. He fucked it up the second he married your Mom and treated her bad, and had you and treated you bad! He fucked it up when he married my Mom, and fucked it up when he hurt me, and hurt her, and— and—"

"Woah, woah, hey, shitbird!" Billy exclaimed, alarmed, pushing her gently off his shoulder and looking into her face. "Calm down..."

Max couldn't calm down. Everything sad and awful that had happened to her in the past two years felt like it was falling on her head, heavy as an anvil. Billy's confession had torn the flimsy bandaid she'd been keeping over her hurts to stop them from bleeding. Never in a thousand years would she have predicted Billy liked guys, and the many times she had seen Billy's bloody face and her step father's fury hit her again like she was seeing it for the first time. To her, it didn't matter— Who cared, as long as there was love? But to Neil, it had been something abominable, something unnatural, something horrific. His fear that his son might be gay and the fear that his son might end up disabled for the rest of his life must have mixed like a volatile poison in his gut, all the secret ways he hated people for being what he thought was weak coming out in violence

that escalated onto Max and her Mom. A hatred and sadness so strong it felt like it would choke her raged through her body and she grabbed onto her brother again, yanking him close.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” she told him through tears. “Okay? You’re safe now.”

She repeated the things he’d said to her after Neil had hit her in April. His words had made her feel safe, helped her to stop the treacherous, anxious train of thought that came to her late at night and wondered if maybe she’d deserved Neil’s violence. Whenever she began to doubt herself, Billy’s words came back to her, telling her she was safe, and that she wasn’t to blame. She wondered how he’d known to say that, but then, maybe it was what he had wanted to hear all those times Neil had hurt him.

Billy was very quiet, and very still, and eventually Max stopped crying enough to pull away, wiping her face with the back of her hand. She looked at him. His eyes were wide, his eyebrows lifted.

“Thanks,” he whispered, blinking.

Max sniffed, furiously dragging the sleeve of her jacket over her face. Beside her, Billy turned his head to his shoulder, wiping his eyes on the sleeve of his coat. The cigarette he’d forgotten about was still lit, and he tapped it, putting it in his mouth. They both slowly collected themselves. Max was grateful they could talk like this, but they still weren’t used to it. They hadn’t been raised to cry in front of each other, to talk about the things that bothered them, and it was a while before she felt comfortable enough to speak again.

Her mind buzzed and she wondered what to say to him. What did you say? She bit her lip and twisted her hands, her foot absentmindedly reaching out and sitting on top of her skateboard, rolling it back and forth on the walk.

“Eleven thought that you might... Well. She saw you and Steve talking, when we went out to A&W, after we had that meeting about your surgery. She saw you and Steve and... I dunno. She knew somehow. I didn’t totally believe her.”

Max clamped her mouth shut, looking out across the lawn. She couldn't bear to look at her brother right now. If she did, she might start crying again. Billy let out a quiet little laugh, crushing his cigarette on the concrete.

"That Eleven, she's... Somethin' else."

"Yeah. Did you know she can lift cars and stuff with her mind?" Max said quickly, trying to steer the conversation away from things that might make them both upset again. "And one time, at the mall, these girls laughed at us so she made one of their milkshakes explode. It was so cool."

Billy chuckled softly.

"Yeah, she's... She's cool," Max continued. "I dunno. She doesn't have any, like... Biases? She just saw you and Steve together and was happy and thought you guys were in love, and I like... I didn't wanna tell her that some people don't like people like you and Robin, you know? She was just... Happy. She thought you were happy, and that made her happy..."

Max didn't really know where she was going with this. She just didn't know what else to talk about.

Billy licked his lips, and fidgeted.

"Do *you* ... Not like... People who like… Y'know?"

He trailed off, unable to finish.

"I don't care," Max said. "If you're happy, right?"

Billy turned his face a little toward her, swallowing. He nodded.

"You're actually not the first person who... Who told me they liked guys..." Max confessed, in a rush. "Last summer, Will told me that he likes guys too."

She wasn't sure if that was her secret to tell, but she had a desperate desire to let him know he wasn't alone, and that she knew and cared about someone like him. She wanted him to know she would love

him all the same.

“Will Byers?” Billy asked, flicking his cigarette into the grass.

“Yeah...”

“That sucks...” Billy sighed, snorting derisively.

“What do you mean?” Max asked, confused.

“Well, he’s like... A tender little guy, y’know? Soft… *Nice* . People are always callin’ those guys queer, and... It’s just really hard when it’s true...”

“But you’re not a tender little guy,” Max said, tilting her head, her eyebrows furrowing.

“I was,” Billy said quietly. “Once.”

November 22nd, 1986

Steve and Billy walked into Steve’s parents’ house and were immediately bombarded with the sound of raucous, feminine laughter. Billy raised his eyebrows as he walked in the front door behind Steve, who rolled his eyes.

“It’s my Mom’s turn to host her book club,” Steve explained, sighing lightly. “It’s more an excuse for them to day drink than to actually read books, but... Y’know. We’ll just try and sneak by...”

They took off their shoes and walked down the hall, passing by the entryway to the living room. They almost made it to the safety of the stairs when a voice called out to them.

“Oh, Billy! Steven!” Sandra Harrington hiccuped, waving her hand and putting down a glass of wine on the coffee table. “Come on in for a moment, would you?”

A book titled *Hollywood Wives* by Jackie Collins sat forgotten beside her on a pink floral high back chair at the very end of the room near the fireplace. All around her, moms and middle aged ladies in white

pumps, pretty dresses, and permed hair sat on the white loveseat and long sofa, legs crossed, books forgotten, hands holding half-full glasses of red wine. Many were flushed in the face past their makeup, putting manicured nails to their faces in laughter. Steve took one look around and saw Karen Wheeler sitting near his Mom and blanched. She too choked a little on her wine, putting her hand on her chest. She adjusted herself on the chair, and smiled a demure and unaffected smile. Billy walked past him into the room, his socks padding softly on the white carpet, standing at the wide living room entryway with his hands on his hips and a shit eating grin on his face.

"Come sit, both of you! I want to show you off!" his Mom cried happily. Steve's head recoiled, offended.

"Show me— *What?* "

Billy completely ignored him and came boldly into the room, walking by the coffee table and nodding to Mrs. Wheeler and three other women beside her.

"Afternoon, ladies," he greeted, giving them a cocky smile. They practically swooned and Steve watched as Mrs. Wheeler bit her lip briefly before nodding back, uncrossing and re-crossing her legs. He came to stand to the left of his Mom, leaning on the high back of her chair.

"Oh, come here, Steven! Don't just stand there, you goose!" his Mom giggled, gesturing at him. He inhaled deeply and made his way across the room, the air cloying with the scent *Opium* by Yves Saint-Laurent. He came over and sat down on the floor beside his Mom's chair, near Mrs. Wheeler. He was completely uninterested in being "shown off" to his Mom's book club friends, but Billy on the other hand... Steve could practically see his ego inflating at an alarming rate, watching the half-drunk ladies flutter and giggle and give him doe eyes.

"Here, Steven, why don't you have some wine, dear?" his Mom offered, holding out the bottle and a glass.

"No, thanks, I'm good..."

“Billy?”

“Oh, well— I certainly wouldn’t mind, if it’s alright with you, Mrs. Harrington…” Billy said, a model of politeness and chivalry. Steve rolled his eyes.

“ *If it’s alright* — Goodness, isn’t he a gentleman, ladies?”

A giggling chorus of agreement rang throughout the room and his Mom poured Billy a glass, handing it to him. He smiled at the room and raised his glass.

“Cheers, ladies,” he said, a mischievous glint in his blue eyes. Steve shook his head and leaned forward, grabbing some abandoned charcuterie and shoving it in his mouth.

“Now, Steven here started working with his father at the dealership, and he’s thinking of buying himself a little house! Isn’t that wonderful?”

The ladies agreed that it was. He felt Billy’s eyes on him and he caught them. Billy looked a little surprised. Steve had been planning on telling him today, but his Mom had beat him to it. She was exaggerating a bit, of course. He’d only mentioned that he might start looking for his own place soon. It wasn’t like he was actively looking.

“And Billy here, you ladies remember him?” his Mom continued, putting a hand on Billy’s arm. “He was in that horrible thing that happened at the Starcourt Mall, bless him…”

“Oh, so awful…,” one lady clucked. “You’re so lucky, dear…”

“Thank you,” Billy said, his voice low and soft. Steve wanted to gag. What a fucking *ham.*

“Well— He had some problems with his vision, but now he’s all fixed up!” his Mom said enthusiastically. “Isn’t that lovely?”

The women cooed and agreed. Billy put his glass of wine on the coffee table and pulled out a pair of cheap reading glasses Susan had bought him from K-Mart. He put them on, smiling.

“Ah,” he said. “That’s better! I swear you all look even prettier than I remember...”

The women dissolved into giggles. “Oh stop it..,” his Mom chortled, red in the face, swatting him lightly on the arm.

Billy grinned around at them and picked his glass of wine back up, taking a sip.

“So, Billy, what’re you planning on doing now?” one of the ladies asked him. Steve rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, getting up and walking out of the room. Nobody even noticed him go.

He felt very annoyed and he couldn’t place why. He knew Billy was like this. He knew he was a flirt, knew he liked the company of older ladies. It wasn’t like it should be a shock to him that he was excited to be the centre of attention of an entire book club’s worth of ladies. Steve absentmindedly went to the bathroom and took a piss. As he washed his hands, he looked at himself in the mirror, his lips twisting. Billy had probably forgotten all about him now. He was probably gonna call and try to come over every Saturday afternoon now, in the hopes that he might catch his Mom hosting. Steve thought about the Saturday drives that they’d been taking together for almost a year now, almost every weekend without fail. Would that change now that Billy could see? Would he want to branch out... Maybe find someone else? Someone who *wasn’t* him?

Steve took a deep breath and shook his head. If Robin were there with him, she’d have accused him of spiralling— and she’d have been right. It wasn’t like he owned Billy’s time. If he wanted to do different things now, on his own, that was his business. Steve didn’t want to hold him back, he was just worried about being left behind. He felt resentful of the ladies laughing and fawning over him and with the full force of a truck smashing into him he realized he was jealous.

Like. *Really jealous.*

He wanted to be obnoxious and gross and fawn over Billy in front of

his friends. *He* wanted to show him off. *He* wanted to bring him into a room of acquaintances and say, 'Yeah, that's right. He's beautiful and he loves *me.'* Steve winced at himself, drying his hands. Jealousy was an awful colour on him, but he couldn't help it. It flared up like a fire in his belly that he couldn't tamp down.

Loves me.

Steve held onto the powder blue hand towel in his Mom's pristine bathroom and blinked slowly. Is that what he wanted? Did he want Billy... To *love* him? The feelings he'd tried to tamp down since they'd cried together in the motel in Los Angeles came flooding back to him. What he'd dismissed as a confused reaction to realizing he liked guys lit up like a neon sign across his mind, spelling out in flashing lights what he realized had been obvious for a long time now: *he was in love with Billy.*

When he thought about who he wanted to talk to, it was always Billy. When he thought about who he could easily spend all of his time with, it was Billy. When he felt upset, it was Billy he wanted to talk to. When he was happy, it was Billy he wanted to share it with. He felt this way about Robin too, but there was something else, something different about these feelings when it came to Billy.

He realized he wanted to *kiss* Billy.

Steve let the hand towel go and put his fingers up to his lips, his cheeks flushing. He swallowed a lump in his throat and took a moment to gather himself. Then, he left the bathroom, coming to the entryway to the living room and peering in.

Billy was sitting down on one of the sofas, squashed between two ladies, and telling a story.

"And then... Pop! It was fuckin' gone!" Billy exclaimed, grinning. The room erupted into laughter, some of the women wiping their eyes.The deep jealousy he'd felt before reared its head as he leaned against the wall, crossing his arms, but he forced it down. Instead, he watched Billy laugh, watched him be the centre of attention. Billy downed his glass of wine and then looked over at Steve, catching his eye. The cocky grin he'd been wearing faded and became soft, his

eyes crinkling. Steve's heart skipped a beat and his jealousy fizzled and disappeared. Billy was definitely enjoying the attention— there was no doubt about that— but he was giving them the rehearsed charm, the polite friendliness. When he looked at Steve... Was there something more? Something more genuine? He hoped there was...

"Thank you very much, ladies, it's been a pleasure chatting with you," Billy complimented, standing up. He came over to Steve and stood beside him, leaning down to put his empty glass on the coffee table. When he straightened up he put his hands in his pockets, and nodded at his Mom.

"Thanks for the wine, Mrs. Harrington," he said, very politely.

"Oh, don't you worry about it! Now, why don't you have dinner with us sometime?" Sandra asked him, smiling. "You're always running out before I can ask! I'll have you over one of these days, if it's the last thing I do!"

Steve looked at Billy and he seemed to freeze a little. He knew how awkward and difficult Billy found dinners at other people's houses, especially with their parents.

"I'd love to!" he said, nodding and smiling.

"Oh good! How about sometime near Christmas?"

"Uh— Yeah, alright."

Billy thanked her and they walked away into the hall. Once they were out of sight Steve swatted Billy on the side of the head lightly.

"Stop flirting with my Mom's book club!" Steve hissed.

Billy snorted and ducked away from the blow.

"What?" he whined innocently, grinning, following behind as Steve walked up the stairs. "I can't help it that moms love me..."

"Ugh..."

His face flushed as he walked down the hall, Billy chortling with

laughter behind him. He couldn't believe this was the guy his heart had apparently decided to fall in love with... This chain smoking, loogie spitting, lewd-eyed asshole.

"Lord help me...," he muttered under his breath as he opened his bedroom door and let Billy in. Billy wandered into the room and his head swivelled around, taking in the sights. Steve closed the door and sat on his bed, cross legged, letting Billy explore. He'd never been inside this room being able to see before. Their plan for the evening, after their drive, was to watch a few movies. Billy was curious to see what the characters in *The Breakfast Club* actually looked like compared to what he'd pictured in his head.

"You did a good job of describing your room," Billy said, sitting on his bed across from him, crossing his legs.

"Yeah?" Steve said absently, staring at a small hole that was working its way through the denim at Billy's knee. He hadn't really realized it before because he'd had such a loud and confident presence, but almost all of Billy's clothes were a little worn and a little worse for wear. He'd started wearing his shirts unbuttoned again, higher than he had before but obviously much less self-conscious than he had been. Steve supposed that maybe his imagination had run away with him on how the scars on his body actually looked. Like a small blemish under the skin that felt massive under the touch, he'd probably let those impressions run wild. Seeing them might have made it easier for him to accept them.

"It's weird that I don't have to help you around anymore," Steve said, before he could stop himself.

Billy smirked a little, inclining his head. "Yeah. It's kinda weird. I mean, I can see... But I still feel like I gotta hold onto something. Even when I go down the hall in my house now I still slide my hand on the wall."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Just got into the habit."

Billy yawned and took off his coat, throwing it onto the floor. He

shuffled up beside Steve and lay down, putting an arm behind his head and lifting one of his knees, lounging comfortably.

“Alright, put the movie on,” he said, gesturing toward the TV and VCR on top of Steve’s dresser against the wall near the foot of the bed. Steve rolled his eyes and got up, walking over to it and switching it on. He changed the channel and turned on the VCR. He opened the movie case and slid the tape in, the screen going black for a moment as the film started. He wandered back to his bed and looked at Billy laying there, casually, watching him move. Steve blinked and had the crazy sensation that maybe, just maybe, Billy had been checking him out. But that was probably just him. He *wanted* Billy to check him out— He had no idea what he actually felt about him.

He lay down beside him on the bed, crossing his ankles, lacing his fingers together on his belly. They watched the movie in silence. Halfway through, Billy’s arm moved. Steve looked over at it and watched, amazed and thrilled, as it took one of his and slid their intertwined fingers between them on the mattress. Steve flicked his eyes over to Billy’s but he was staring at the TV screen, his expression calm and light. Steve swallowed and stared back at the TV.

He curled his fingers tightly in Billy’s.

Steve swallowed as the credits for *Back to the Future* rolled, lifting his face ever so slightly to look down at Billy. His bedroom was flooded in light from the TV, tingeing everything in pinks and yellows. His face was turned to the side, lying on him, fast asleep. His glasses were sitting crooked on his nose. He turned his head and looked at his electric alarm clock and the red numbers shined out 1:38 AM. He blinked and turned his head back to Billy. His hand was splayed across his chest, and one of his legs was bent over top of his, curled into him like he was a blanket. Steve’s lips were very close to his forehead, looking over his eyelashes and at the top of his nose.

He stared fondly at him in the dim light. Billy always acted so tough, and in a lot of ways he was tough... But all he wanted was this. He wanted to be held. He wanted to feel safe. Steve felt a rush of love so strong flooding through his body that tears pricked in his eyes. He

reached down with his right hand and gently plucked the glasses off of his face, slowly so as to not wake him. Billy's brow quivered once, but he didn't wake up. Steve reached over and put the glasses on his nightstand, taking the remote and switching the TV off. In the darkness, he let out a little sigh.

If this was how he went to sleep for the rest of his life, he felt he could die happy.

Billy woke up with a start, realizing very suddenly that he wasn't in his room. He winced against the bright sun shining through the window, still not used to having light rudely stabbing his eyes the second he woke up. He rubbed them with his hand, and turned over. The room he was in was blurry. He was still in his jeans and shirt from the day before. Bleary eyed, he rolled onto his back. The day before filtered back to him and he realized he must've fallen asleep in the middle of their movie night. He peered across the pillow and saw Steve's face smashed against it, his mouth open, snoring. His hair had fallen into his face. Billy snorted softly, smiling, and gently brushed his hair out of his face. He absentmindedly counted the moles and freckles on his skin and lost count halfway, just happy to be able to see him. Steve snorted in his sleep, smacking his lips loudly and rolled onto his back. Billy shook his head against the pillow. Steve could probably sleep through an explosion. Billy lifted his head and could barely make out 5:54 AM on the electric alarm clock on his bedside table. He blinked. His glasses were sitting in front of it, folded neatly. Had Steve taken them off last night...?

The simplicity and sweetness of this gesture hit Billy like a ton of bricks and he let out a little breath, smiling, flopping onto his back and putting a hand over his heart. *Jesus Christ...* He turned his head and looked at Steve's carefree face, snoring away. God, he loved him... He was a fucking fool for him. It was almost embarrassing how much he loved him, an entire life's worth of being forced to equate tenderness with weakness prickling at the back of his mind. He closed his eyes, a pleased smirk sitting stubbornly on his face. It was embarrassing and stupid but the more he sat with his feelings, the more he was excited to be embarrassing and stupid. The kind of dumb, obvious love that made Max gag and roll her eyes... That was

what he wanted, deep down.

Steve snorted and jerked awake. Billy looked at him and raised an eyebrow, rolling onto his side like a lingerie model, one hand splayed over his hip and his other hand supporting his head.

“Good morning, stud,” Billy greeted, grinning.

Steve stared at him, confused, his hair sticking up on end, his eyes squinting.

“Whuh,” Steve muttered blearily.

“Whuh,” Billy repeated back.

Steve sat up, scratching his head, looking very sleepy and confused. He paused and yawned, looking at Billy. He snorted with soft laughter, stretching.

“Guess we fell asleep,” Steve said.

“Naw. I actually went home and came back here real quick,” Billy said, smiling, turning to lie on his back again. “You know how much I love mornings...”

“Mm,” Steve said, yawning uncontrollably. “Good point.” He flopped back down, undoing his jeans and chucking them out of the side of the bed and onto the floor. He yanked the covers up to his chin. Billy shook his head, doing the same. When he settled down again, Steve’s eyes were already closed.

“G’night,” Steve muttered, reaching out and patting Billy on the forehead. Billy slid a foot forward and wrapped it around Steve’s, who jumped.

“Ugh! Icy fuckin’ feet,” Steve hissed. Billy grinned at him and entwined his other foot with his. Steve let him.

“Why’re you so fuckin’ cold all the time?” he grumbled into the comforter.

The shadow of the Mind Flayer flitted across his consciousness and he

froze. He blinked rapidly trying to recover. When he turned to look at Steve, he was staring at him, wide eyed, his eyebrows furrowed apologetically.

“Sorry,” he said quietly.

“It’s cause you hog all the fuckin’ blankets,” Billy said, swallowing down his fear. Steve’s face went from concerned to teasingly annoyed in an instant, rolling his eyes.

“Really? I’m the blanket hog?”

“Yeah, you are,” Billy said, burrowing himself down into them.

“I don’t gotta listen to this slander,” Steve yawned, smirking. “I’m going back to sleep.”

Billy smiled, closing his eyes.

He was asleep in moments.

November 20th, 1986

Billy, Robin, and Harley waved goodbye to Steve’s BMW as it pulled out of the parking lot, his hand waving to them from his open window as he turned onto the main road and out of sight. Billy watched him go and felt immediately like he was missing something. He swallowed down the feeling as Harley and Robin laced their arms through his. They walked across the University of Indianapolis campus toward a grassy common area where students were busy running to and fro from classes. As he got close to the crowds, he thought he caught a few people looking at him with curiosity and he suddenly got the very distinct impression that he didn’t belong. He knew he was a dumb, beefy rough house, and catching the smart linen suits and fashionably dishevelled clothes of the guys that moved past him, he suddenly knew he *looked* it. This place was way more Steve’s vibe than his. He tried not to think about how his scuffed jacket and tight jeans looked against the pastel Esprit tops of the girls who passed him by. There were a few punky looking kids walking

around, and he was glad to see that they weren't weirdos among this more intellectual crowd.

But there was nobody there who looked like *him* .

He cast his eyes downward and hated that he felt insecure. He knew he was being stupid. He was just as good as any of these kids... But in this environment, when he overheard snippets of conversations that contained words he barely understood, he felt like a fish out of water.

“I have class in like fifteen minutes... I’m sorry I can’t stay for very long,” Harley apologized.

“Oh, it’s cool,” Billy shrugged.

“We’ll walk you,” Robin said firmly, smiling.

Billy could tell they knew something was wrong with him, but were too polite to ask out in public. They walked into a large building and through a dizzying amount of hallways until they stopped outside a tall, thick, dark wood door set into the side of a concrete wall.

“Welcome to the psych dungeon,” Harley snorted. “As if mental health isn’t already demonized, they stick the study of it in the dark, creepy basement...”

Robin laughed. Billy didn’t really know what she was talking about, but smiled anyway. They stood in a crowd of other students, holding bags and binders. He felt like a bull in a china shop, like he was too much, too big, like his hands were clumsy and rough. After a few moments, an attractive middle-aged woman wearing a green tweed skirt and a white blouse walked up the hall and up to the door, holding a folder under her arm. She shuffled the papers and tried to unlock the door with a key ring, but lost hold of her files and they went tumbling in a heap to the floor. Billy stepped forward, crouching down, and gathered her papers. The woman kneeling looked up at him and gave him a curious smile, taking them from him.

“Thank you,” she said. “I don’t believe we’ve met...?”

Billy stood, switching an easy smile onto his face in an instant. Out of habit, he leaned an arm above his head against the door frame.

“Oh, no, we haven’t,” Billy said. “I’m just visiting my friends here.”

He gestured a hand back to where Harley and Robin were standing.

“I see,” the woman said, smiling, her eyes bright. “Are you a prospective student?”

Billy laughed, turning his head, his chin lifted, looking around at the students gathered. They were staring at him.

“No way,” he said, turning back to the professor. “Wouldn’t be much use to you, unless you got car troubles or... Somethin’ similar.”

He thought he heard Robin gag softly behind him, but he ignored her. This campus made him feel like a complete moron, but if there was one thing he had over all these kids was his charm. A guy nearby was giving him a nasty look, which was a pity– He would’ve been really handsome without the sneer. He was looking at Billy like he was a piece of trash he’d found on his shoe.

The professor turned and gestured to the class. “Well— This is relevant to our unit. What do you think of this young man here?”

Billy blinked, his head recoiling a little. What did she *mean* what did they think about him?!

“He’s acting overconfident, probably because he feels insecure,” one student said, sniffing.

Billy turned his head and furrowed his brows, a bemused smile on his face.

“He put his hand above you in the doorway to show dominance,” said the sneering kid, adjusting his glasses.

Billy’s hand slid from the doorframe and he crossed his arms.

“He was probably a bully and a—“

“How about,” Billy said loudly, squaring his shoulders and cracking his neck, “He’s a decent guy whose Dad used to kick his ass for being queer and now he’s a better person than he was. He can also wipe the floor with any of you assholes, any time, any place.”

He narrowed his eyes and leaned into the professor’s face. “How’s that for interesting, *bitch*?”

The hallway went deadly silent.

“I won’t be spoken to like this,” the professor said, her voice a little on the shrill side, fumbling for her keys.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re a fuckin’ gift to this world,” Billy said, his voice low and rough. “Get in that goddamn classroom and keep your judgemental fuckin’ opinions to yourself.” He turned his head to the guy who’d been sneering at him, flaring his nostrils. “You wanna go too, shitstain?”

“N–No,” the kid mumbled, his face flushed in shame.

The professor motored away through the door. The guy who had been sneering at him went quickly in after her, avoiding his eyes. Other students smirked triumphantly as they walked past. One guy patted him on the chest happily, giving him a grin. He felt Harley come up beside him and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Oh,” she said blissfully. “That was incredible. I have been trying to tell her off all year. She keeps pulling random people aside and doing what she just did to you. It’s totally gross and inappropriate. I tried reporting her to the Dean, but you know how these things go... I don’t think she’ll do that ever again...”

Robin walked forward, cackling loudly, her voice echoing across the hall.

Robin was still chuckling as she led Billy into her dorm room, letting the door fall shut behind her. Billy walked around her, rolling his eyes and throwing himself onto her bed, taking out a cigarette from the pack in the front pocket of his coat. He popped it into his mouth

and lit it.

“Alright, alright,” he muttered, his cigarette bouncing on his lips, waving his hand.

“God, that was legendary,” Robin laughed, throwing herself onto the bed beside him, staring up at the ceiling. Both she and Harley hated that professor with every fibre of her beings. She was a total axe wound. Billy’s hand fluttered in front of her face, offering her the cigarette, and she took it, taking a drag.

“That professor is totally against gay people, too,” she said, casually flicking her wrist. “Like, she doesn’t say it outright, but she sort of says it in these passive aggressive shitty ways.”

Billy shook his head and took the cigarette from her.

“I don’t get that, never did,” he said. “I mean… You an’ me, we’re… Well, we’re like that, but… It’s nobody’s fuckin’ business. Just mind your own fuckin’ business!”

“Yup,” Robin agreed, crossing her hands over her belly. This professor, Professor Robert, had casually insinuated her disapproval to both Robin and Harley many times regarding their obvious affections for one another. Harley had visited the Dean and he had promised her they would do something about it… But the fact of the matter was that they were two lesbians in an institution that coddled the old way of doing things like an inattentive parent to a spoiled brat. Robin had watched many times in cold fury as both she and especially Harley were ignored and passively aggressively sent away.

“I kind of hate that you told her off and she’ll probably listen to you because we’ve been trying to do that forever,” Robin sighed. “But at this point I’ll take it.”

“The trick is bein’ a violent, unstable son of a bitch,” Billy snorted sarcastically, crossing his arms, the cigarette on his lips.

Robin laughed and shook her head. “So, how’s Hawkins?”

“Same old, same old,” he shrugged. “Susan’s divorcing my Dad. He’s penny pinching us. Max’s gonna be able to drive in like six months

and put the Indy 500 to fuckin' shame."

"Did they ever reopen the Starcourt Mall?" Robin asked curiously, taking the cigarette from Billy's mouth and tapping it in an ashtray behind her head.

"No," Billy snorted. "Hell no. The thing's being demolished next year. There's still a government fence around it."

"Damn," Robin muttered, raising her eyebrows. She shook her head. What crazy shit she had lived through...

"How's Steve?"

"Busy," Billy said, taking back the cigarette. "Works every day."

"You miss him?" Robin asked, flicking her eyes to the right.

Billy readjusted himself on the bed. "If I said no I'd be lyin.'"

"Yeah, you'd be a liar," she said, nudging him.

A silence lapsed between them. Billy handed her the butt of the cigarette and she squashed it into the ashtray. He lit another one.

"Billy— You never really answered my question," she said tentatively.

"What question?" he asked, rubbing his nose.

"About... Whether you liked Steve."

She heard Billy swallow loudly.

"It's just... I think you might..." she continued, biting her lip. "You know?"

"It's that obvious, huh?" he asked, closing his eyes, his cigarette hanging off of his lips.

"Um," Robin said, wincing. "Yeah. It's really... Really obvious, actually..."

“Fuck,” Billy swore softly, sighing heavily.

“D’you think it’s obvious... To Steve?” he asked after a few moments.

“Nothing is obvious to Steve,” Robin snorted. “I mean, love him to death, but he can be oblivious...”

Robin paused.

“Only... When we were getting captured by Russians, he kinda showed me he can pay attention if he really wants to... I just think there are some things that he keeps himself oblivious to on purpose.”

Billy let out a frustrated groan, his eyes flinging to the ceiling, shaking his head.

“See, that’s what... Agh! That’s what I’m fuckin’...”

He gestured wildly with his hand.

“What I’m fuckin’ ... *Afraid of* , I guess... The fact that he notices but he don’t wanna say anything.”

“I mean... I think it’d be worse if he genuinely didn’t notice and you told him you liked him, you know? I know he’d care about you all the same, but it’d make it awkward...”

Robin shrugged sympathetically. “But I think he kinda knows, and since he does kinda know, what’s the worst that could happen, right?”

“The worst thing that could happen is that I get all sappy and vulnerable, and then he breaks my fuckin’ heart,” Billy sniffed, his eyes pricked with tears. He wiped them, the cigarette smouldering between his fingers, swallowing hard.

“Oh, Billy...,” Robin sighed sadly. She rolled over on her side, propping her head up with her hand and patting him on the head.

“Why is this so fuckin’ hard?” he demanded, his voice rough and constricted. “I used to be so good at it, Rob...”

“It’s ‘cause you didn’t love any of those other people, dude,” Robin said, smiling lightly. “And you love this person.”

“Shit,” Billy groaned, putting his cigarette in his mouth and rubbing his eyes with his palms.

“Love makes everything hard, my friend,” Robin sighed, giving Billy a sad smile. She laughed. “But it also kinda makes everything a little easier too...”

“How’d you tell Harley?”

“I, uh... I called her. In February, after we got home from the cabin. And I just... Told her that I had romantic feelings for her and she said she had them about me too,” Robin shrugged, blushing a little.

“‘Romantic feelings,’” Billy repeated under his breath, rolling his eyes. “And so, what— You just said, *‘Hello Harley. I have romantic feelings for you. Do you feel the same way?’”*

“No, dingus, I didn’t say it like that,” Robin snorted. “I just...”

Robin bit her lip, smiling.

“I just told her that I thought she was beautiful. I told her that I felt happy when I was with her, that I loved our letters, that I wanted to kiss her and spend as much time with her as I possibly could... I told her I wanted to be wherever she was...”

Robin laughed, embarrassed, flopping back onto the mattress, grinning goofily. “It’s corny, but... It’s true. And that’s what matters, right?”

“I guess,” Billy sighed. “I just...Steve... He...”

He closed his eyes, licked his lips, and started again.

“I just feel happy when I’m with him... Y’know?”

“Yeah,” Robin smiled softly, looking at him. “I get you.”

Billy swallowed, a pained look coming over him.

“I know I’ll live if he don’t feel like that about me, I just... I wanna believe he does... But I also think about what happens if he does feel like that about me... And it’s...”

He trailed off, starting again, his blue eyes watering.

“Hawkins is a small town, and—and Steve’s got his new job... And what if Susan hates us? Or what if Steve’s parents hate us?”

He squeezed his eyes shut. A tear wound its way down his cheek.

“What if, even after everything, even if he does like me that way... What if we aren’t strong enough to be together?”

Robin’s gut twisted and her heart slammed against her rib cage. She hadn’t told her Mom about the fact that she liked girls and the fact that she was dating Harley yet. She had been too scared. The words had been on her lips as she’d turned to wave goodbye to her Mom as she got in the van, but she had been too afraid. She hadn’t been strong enough either. A powerful feeling rose up inside her that she couldn’t name. It was fierce and fearless, and it bloomed in her chest like a flame.

“You can’t worry about that,” Robin said, her voice constricted, staring at him intensely. “All you can do is try.”

Billy looked at her, his pale blue eyes trying to read her face. Something passed between them, and he nodded once, slowly.

“You’re stronger than you think, Billy,” Robin said quietly. “And Steve is the strongest person I know... I promise you, no matter what happens... He’ll still care about you. He’ll still like you. He’ll still wanna be around you.”

She kept Steve’s confession to herself. Though he had once accidentally divulged the fact that she liked girls to Billy, many moons ago, she couldn’t bring herself to do the same. Not only that, but she could tell Billy was *in love* with Steve— not lust, not desire– *love* . He wanted to spend his life with Steve. She had a feeling Steve was attracted to Billy, but she didn’t know if his feelings ran deeper than that. She didn’t want to give Billy any false hopes, and break his

heart any more than it had the potential to break.

“I dunno what I’ll do if Steve don’t love me,” Billy said, laughing quietly. “I mean, I know what I’ll do— survive, like always. Work hard and put Max through college. But, man... It’d be so much easier *with* him, you know?”

“Yeah,” Robin agreed. She quietly hoped, with all her heart, that the tenderness she’d seen on Steve’s face was love, and that when the time came he would be brave enough to realize it.

December 1st, 1986

Billy looked around the kitchen one last time, taking stock.

The chicken was in the oven. The potatoes were simmering on the stove. There was a case of beer in the fridge. He went to the mirror by the back door and looked at his reflection. He was wearing one of his short sleeved button ups, the buttons undone halfway down his chest like he’d always used to do. His jeans were tight. His hair was curled and bouncy. He turned and checked his ass, smirking. All in order.

He blinked once and remembered something, walking into the living room and sifting through a pile of 45s until he found the record he was looking for. He lifted the lid of the turntable and set the 45 down. Satisfied, he put down the lid and straightened up. Susan and Max were out spending an evening doing some Christmas shopping, and he had the house to himself.

Steve was coming over for dinner.

He licked his lips, feeling giddy and silly. He knew he was acting like a total lovesick dumbass in a movie, but he couldn’t help it. It was getting harder and harder for him to push down his feelings, and the advice Robin had given him was bouncing around in his head. He felt like he was floating. Even though he knew it was dangerous and one sided and totally stupid, a small secret part of his heart wanted to think this was a date— and goddammmit, if it was a date, he was

gonna make it the most romantic fucking date that ever was. He had no idea if Steve had any clue about how he felt, but he'd treat him to a nice dinner anyway. After all, Steve had been his best friend, confidant, and protector for the last year. He deserved it. There was a knock at the back door, and Billy hurried into the kitchen and opened it. Steve smiled up at him from the porch. It was flurrying wildly outside, flakes settling on the shoulders of his jacket and hair. Billy smirked at him and stepped aside.

"You're early," he scolded teasingly.

"Yeah, yeah," Steve yawned, coming in. He took off his shoes and hung his coat on a peg as Billy closed the door. Then Steve turned to him and wrapped his arms around him, giving him a warm hug. Billy was a little breathless as he hugged back. He'd never met someone who insisted on hugging as much as Steve and his friends did. Hell—He'd even gotten an awkward Dad hug from Steve's father the week before when he'd been leaving them to go on a work trip. Billy had just happened to be there as he'd hugged Steve and his wife, and before Billy could step away he was being given a weird, formal embrace. At first he'd been really uncomfortable with it all but he'd never really said anything because he also secretly wanted one. Then, Steve had made it such a habit that now he looked forward to it.

"Did you come straight here from work?" Billy asked him, stepping away and going over to the potatoes, giving them a stir.

"Yeah," Steve said, stretching. He undid his tie and pulled it off, shoving it into his coat pocket. He came and sat down at the kitchen table. "So, what's for dinner?" he asked.

"Chicken and potatoes," Billy shrugged, putting the lid back on the pot. "Can't really make anything else. I kinda suck at cooking. I was gonna do carrots, but you're already here, so..."

"Here, I'll do them. They won't take that long," Steve offered. Billy leaned against the counter and watched as Steve got up and retrieved the carrots from the counter. He put them on the dinner table and then went fishing in the fridge, pulling out two beers. He closed the fridge door with his sock foot and sat back down. Billy went and got two paring knives from the drawer, laughing softly to himself at how

Steve was making himself at home, helping himself to his beer. He slid out a cutting board from beside the stove and then plunked a small pot between them. He sat down with a sigh across from Steve, sliding a beer toward him. He pulled the tab and took a sip as Steve handed him a carrot. He peeled it, his thumb guiding the blade. He'd gotten very good at peeling vegetables in the last year. He had been so desperate to feel useful he'd started to do small chores around the house without being asked, helping Susan in the kitchen, taking care of things at home, especially after his Dad left. Now that he could mostly see again, he found he *liked* taking care of things. He'd started to cook a little, even though he wasn't very skilled, and the relief and gratefulness that he saw in Susan's tired eyes when she came home and there was a plate of food sitting for her wrapped in seran wrap made him feel... *Good.* It made him feel like he was a part of a family.

He watched Steve peel carrots and laughed at him.

"You suck at peeling," he said, chopping his carrot and putting the bits in the pot. He took another one and drank long from his beer, smacking his lips and putting it down.

"Shut up," Steve snorted, laughing, as more carrot than peel ended up on the cutting board.

"Those rich boy hands aren't used to real work," Billy grinned, sticking his tongue out a little at him. "They're all tender and soft."

"Well, you'd know best, wouldn't you?" Steve quipped brightly, smiling down at his knife.

Billy looked down at his carrots, shaking his head, a flush flaring to his cheeks.

"I s'pose you're right," Billy said, chopping and gathering, remembering the joke he'd made so long ago about their constant hand-holding really hurting their chances of getting girlfriends. "Your game with the ladies certainly hasn't improved since last year..."

Steve made a small noise of annoyance in his throat, but Billy could see him smirking.

“No,” Steve said. “My game with the ladies definitely hasn’t improved.”

Billy’s eyebrows quirked. There was something in the space between them, something half-seen, the glimmer of a quarter at the bottom of a fountain pool, refracted and inexact. They peeled the carrots in relative silence, drinking, and Billy couldn’t help but flick his eyes up every once in a while to Steve’s face, his nerves singing through his hands at the hints that he hoped he heard in Steve’s words. He knew it was gross and cliche, but he loved to look at Steve. Every time he looked and saw Steve was a thrill, an overwhelming feeling of happiness and relief, like seeing a lover in a crowd of strangers.

Steve had rolled the sleeves of his dress shirt up past his elbows. He’d undone the first two buttons of his shirt, the top of his chest, a gentle covering of hair peeking from behind the lapels. His face was smooth, his brown hair swept back, his eyelashes downcast as he held onto the carrot, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration. The shirt was a nice pale blue, light fabric, and it complimented his skin. Billy watched the mole on his cheek twitch as his eyes blinked, chopping the carrot into small pieces and throwing it into the pot. He looked up and noticed Billy staring.

“What’s up?” he asked, a smile on his lips, his eyes crinkling softly in humour.

“Nothing,” Billy said, shrugging. It was a lie. The truth was that he could have kissed Steve right then and there and never let go. “Just not used to seeing you,” he shrugged, explaining himself, looking down and peeling another carrot.

“Do I look older?” Steve snorted, sipping his beer.

Billy smirked down at his carrot. “Yeah. You look ancient. Pretty sure I see some greys.”

Steve looked radiant and wonderful. All of the fuzzy memories he’d had of him from before were no match to the real thing sitting before him, struggling to peel carrots. He’d always found Steve attractive, but now it was a layered experience. All the beautiful and thoughtful things Steve had said to him seemed to sparkle in his eyes and glow

from his skin. All the trust and kindness Steve had shown him was there, plain as day— and the affection Steve felt for him was there too. Seeing him laugh and hearing him laugh at the same time was almost overwhelming.

“When you looked in the mirror for the first time, after everything... Was it weird?” Steve asked him curiously, putting down his beer and grabbing another carrot.

Billy hummed, chopping his carrot, throwing it in the pot. He took a sip of beer too.

“Yeah,” he said eventually. It had been.

It wasn’t that his face was different. It wasn’t that his body was scarred. It wasn’t that his hair was longer, or his face changed.

It was that *he* was different.

“A lot happened, you know?” Billy shrugged. He smiled. “But— I’m still as handsome as ever.” He belched loudly.

“I think you got some of that in the carrots,” Steve chuckled. He threw his chopped carrots on the pot and looked. “That’s probably enough, right?”

“Yeah.”

Billy got up and took the pot with him to the sink, filling it. He plopped it onto the stove, turning on the burner and covering it with a lid. He bent his head and opened the stove, checking on the chicken. It still needed a bit of time. He closed the oven and stood, turning around and stretching. He scratched his belly through his shirt and grabbed another set of beers from the fridge. He sat down across from Steve and handed him one over the pile of carrot shavings.

Steve took it, leaning back and shaking his head, regarding Billy.

“What?” Billy asked, pulling the tab and flicking it onto the table.

“I can’t believe no girls have tried to marry you yet,” Steve grinned.

“I mean, you cook, you clean, you do laundry... What more could a working girl want?”

Billy rolled his eyes, taking a drink.

“Yes, my mama made sure I had all the skills a young man should have so I’d make a good husband,” Billy snorted sarcastically. He leaned back in his chair and grabbed a pack of cigarettes and an ashtray from the counter behind him, taking out one and lighting it.

“You *would* make a good husband,” Steve mused, getting up and grabbing his cigarettes from his coat, coming to sit back down. He lit one, inhaling long, tilting his head. Billy’s heart leapt into his throat. Steve gestured with his hand, the cigarette caught between his fingers. “I mean, you don’t wanna hit your kids, so— Good start. And you got a good heart... Even if you are a little gross.”

Billy closed his eyes and shook his head, smiling bemusedly.

“No way,” he said, tapping his cigarette in the ashtray. “I’d make a totally shit husband. S’not like I got good examples to go off of...”

“Psh,” Steve said derisively. “I think you do— Class A examples on what *not* to do... Seriously, man. If you just did the exact opposite of what your Dad did with you and Susan and your Mom, you’d make a good husband and a good dad.”

Billy shook his head, smiling lightly. “Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

He took a drag off his cigarette. Steve’s Dad, for all his faults, still took the time to hug his son. Steve didn’t dislike his father, in fact, he loved him— But that didn’t mean that his Dad was perfect in any way. He’d made mistakes. He hadn’t spent enough time with his son. He criticized him. But, in the end, Steve loved and respected him. Billy supposed that if he ended up with a kid someday... As long as he sprinkled a little love into doing his best, he’d be okay. He blinked, hearing the potatoes starting to boil over and went to test them. They were done, so he mashed them, putting a little butter in. He felt Steve’s eyes in him the whole time. The kitchen was quiet, the ceiling fan flicking the soft yellow light around the room on the brown linoleum floor and white cupboards. Billy had never before

met people who he could be quiet with. He had always been a restless soul, full of action, jumping from one thing to the next, distracting himself from the things that haunted him.

He slid the wooden spoon across the side of the pot and put it down on the counter. The last person he had been able to be quiet with was his mother, as a child, then, for a brief and wonderful time, Harley. Now he found he could sit in the nothingness, could know that people like Steve were there, enjoying the quiet, enjoying him, happy to be in the same places that he was. He had never known a love this peaceful. There were uncertainties, yes... But he knew now that time was not his enemy. He could wait.

“You know... We might lose this place,” Billy said, gesturing to the kitchen. “Susan told me. Neil’s going after it. He’s gonna try squeeze every fuckin’ penny he can from us.”

“Jesus Christ. Just when I think he can’t get any shittier, he does,” Steve said sympathetically.

“I know,” Billy said, snorting with laughter as he checked on the carrots. Done. “It’s almost funny now, you know? He’s like this... Cartoon villain, almost. You almost can’t believe it...”

“Right? Seriously, it must be exhausting... He should just let it go.”

“He won’t. He thinks he lost, or some crazy bullshit... So now he’s tryin’ to win at something. But, whatever. He’s gone. If he gets the house, he can have it. We’ll figure somethin’ out.”

His father’s grip had loosened and fallen away, like a marble hand fallen from a great and imposing statue to lie upon the ground. It was a heavy burden to carry, but they would survive.

“Yeah,” Steve said, his voice sounding far away. Billy turned off the carrots. He opened the oven and poked the chicken with a fork. It was done. He grabbed some oven mitts and pulled it out onto the stove. As he put the food on two plates, Steve stood and started cleaning up the carrot peels and setting the table. When he turned around, the plates in his hands, Steve had managed to set up a somewhat fancy looking table dressing. The worn dishcloths that he’d

used instead of napkins were even folded nicely into triangles under the knives. Billy blinked, smiling, amused as Steve sat down.

“What?” Steve laughed, shrugging. “Come on, you don’t grow up with an obsessive event planner for your whole life and not pick up some skills.”

“I guess not,” Billy chuckled, putting the plates down. He sat. He looked across the table, across their dinner, their perfectly set cutlery, their cans of beer, the hot meal he’d cooked... Then looked into Steve‘s face. He was staring down at the meal, picking up his knife and fork enthusiastically and cutting the chicken. He shoved a piece into his mouth. His eyes flicked up and he caught Billy staring. He stopped chewing.

“Wha?” Steve asked self-consciously, around the food in his mouth.

“I—“

I love you.

Billy closed his mouth.

“Enjoy,” he said, looking down at his food.

Billy slid down the hall and over to the turntable. He lifted the cue, placing it down on the edge of the 45. He cranked the volume up high. The speakers crackled and hissed as he slid back into the kitchen. Steve was staring at him in bemusement, his arms crossed, the remnants of their dinner and the beers they’d drunk on the table before him. As the music started, Billy slid his hands into Steve’s, pulling him to his feet. He slowly began to sway back and forth, the tinkling piano and gentle taps of the drums slow and sweet as he led Steve in a sloppy waltz.

“If you ever,” he sang, grinning, *“Change your mind... About leavin’... Leavin’ me behind... Oh, oh... Bring it to me, bring your sweet lovin’... Bring it on home to me...”*

“Yeah,” Steve sang, smiling from ear to ear.

“Yeah!” Billy sang back.

“Ye-ahh!” Steve echoed, dissolving in laughter.

Billy dove in close, sliding his hand around Steve’s waist, holding his other hand.

“Oh, so you’re leading this time, huh?” Steve chuckled.

“Yeah,” Billy said, smirking at him. “It’s what a good husband is bred to do… Darlin.’”

Steve squeezed his eyes shut, laughing, throwing back his head. When he opened them again they were soft and crinkled with humour.

“You’re so witty,” Steve complimented, still chuckling. “I mean, when you used to be mean to me I kinda hated it, ‘cause I could tell you were smart. At least with Tommy and the rest of the guys were stupid, you know? You were different. You pretend to be this big fuckin’ meathead but you aren’t that at all.”

“Max said that about me once too,” Billy clucked, swaying Steve around the kitchen floor. “It’s fuckin’ slander. I’m a dumbass meathead and don’t let nobody tell you different.”

“Alright, alright,” Steve said complacently, grinning. “Fine. You’re a dumbass meathead.”

“Damn straight,” Billy smirked. He swooped down and held Steve closer. Steve laughed lightly then wrapped his arms around his waist, putting his head on his shoulder.

Unbeknownst to both of them, Max and Susan had come home. Susan came up the back steps, carrying bags of groceries and small Christmas gifts she’d managed to get, yawning tiredly. As she went up the stairs she heard loud, muffled music coming from inside the kitchen. Recognizing her old Sam Cooke records, she furrowed her brow and peered through the kitchen window in curiosity. Inside, she saw her step-son. His back was to her, wearing a pair of blue jeans and a red shirt, his curly hair over his collar. His hands were outstretched, and in them was Steve Harrington. Her eyes widened.

She watched as Billy led Steve in a dance, their fingers intertwined, her step-son's hand around the other boy's waist. They spun slowly about the kitchen, dancing, smiling, laughing... They turned and she could see Billy's face, and his features were so soft, so happy and at peace.

"Oh," Susan said quietly, amazed, to herself.

She had been unlucky in love. Her first ex husband had been inattentive and mean. Her second husband had brought Billy into her life, but had been even worse. What she saw unfolding before her was something so much better than all that, something true and pure and genuine.

"Mom?" Max asked, curiously, at the bottom of the stairs, holding groceries.

"Oh— Nothing," Susan smiled, turning to her. "You know… Why don't we go for a drive instead?"

"But— Mom— The groceries—?"

"They'll be fine," Susan said, her heart light, unable to stop herself from smiling. She walked back down the stairs, giving Max a serene smile. "Why don't we get an ice cream? We haven't done that in a long time..."

December 4th, 1986

Billy looked at the display of eyeglasses and sighed quietly. The rows upon rows of gold, silver, brown, and black stared back at him, a hundred different eyes in a hundred different shapes. Each time he focused on one, he found something he didn't like and slid to another random pair on the wall. He felt like he was surrounded by them, the metal, wire and plastic closing in on him from all sides. Beside him, Max was having a field day, trying on some of the more outrageous pairs and making faces at herself in the mirror.

"Hey, Billy, look at these!" she snorted, turning around.

He looked at her and chuckled, crossing his arms. The glasses sitting on her nose were square and thick, the plastic a bright red.

“Dunno if those suit you,” he said, shaking his head.

“Yeah, maybe not,” she said, turning around and looking at herself in the thin mirror set between the racks. “They’d look super cool on you, though.”

Billy shook his head at her, coming to stand behind her and looking at her through the mirror. She was grinning teasingly. He plucked the glasses off her face and put them on, raising his eyebrows. She burst out laughing.

“No fuckin’ way,” he said flatly, taking them off and handing them to her.

“Well, what ones *do* you like?” she asked impatiently. They’d been looking for almost half an hour. Billy made a face and looked out into the mall, squinting. His final checkup with Dr. Owens had assured him that the surgery had been a success. He had the full capacity of his vision left. The only issue was that his nearsightedness was more pronounced than it had been before, and now he needed glasses.

Not just reading glasses. *Actual* glasses. The kind you wore most of the time.

He shifted on his feet, absentmindedly rolling the cuff of his jacket further up his forearms. He didn’t know why he found this process so unpleasant. When he’d been twelve, he’d begged his Dad for glasses because he already couldn’t read well and he couldn’t see to read when he was at school. Some of the dickheads in his grade had been calling him stupid. He should’ve been excited to finally get them, but instead he felt oddly repulsed. Billy Hargrove didn’t *wear* glasses. He was the kind of guy who only wore sunglasses if he was going to wear glasses at all.

Susan had left to get something to eat at the food court a while ago, giving him some time to choose. He turned his head away from the crowds walking through the mall and twisted his lips, looking back at the display. A lot of these were expensive, too, and the ones that

weren't expensive he hated. He felt awful even bothering to look at the more expensive ones, but he really couldn't stand to wear something he hated. He just knew that if he hated them, he'd refuse to wear them, and Susan's hard earned money would be wasted... But he also knew they didn't have a lot to work with. He knew Susan well enough by now to know that she'd quietly pay for whatever he chose without complaint, even if it was more than they could afford. He actually had found a pair that he liked more above the rest, but they weren't cheap.

He realized he still hadn't responded to Max.

"Uh, I kind of like... These ones...," he said, stepping forward and pulling a pair of light gold frames off the wall. They were sort of round, sort of square, and not too big. He put them on his face and turned to Max. She grinned at him.

"Yeah, those are cool!" she said.

"Yeah... They're expensive, though, so... No," he said, taking them off and putting them back quickly.

Susan came back into the optometrist's office just then, smiling, holding takeout.

"Oh, did you find a pair?" she asked, coming up to them.

"Uh— No, still looking," Billy said, shrugging.

"He likes these ones," Max said baldly, plucking the pair he had just put back off of the shelf and holding them out to her. Billy gave her an annoyed look. Susan took them from her daughter and he saw as her eye flicked over the price tag. Then she smiled at him and held them out.

"Put them on, let me see."

He took them from her, feeling embarrassed for some reason. He didn't want Susan to pay this much, not for him. He could deal with a cheaper pair he didn't like as much.

He put them on and looked at her through the open lenses, blinking,

his cheeks flush.

“Oh, yes! Those do look nice on you,” she agreed.

“Yeah, but they’re expensive,” Billy said firmly, taking them off his nose and going to put them back on the shelf. “I can find another pair —“

“Billy,” Susan said sternly, putting a hand on his shoulder. He paused and looked at her. She was giving him a look of mild amusement and gentle chiding, shaking her head of permed red hair, the freckles across her nose dancing.

“If you like them, that’s what we’ll get,” she said quietly, leaning in.

“But–”

“We’ll get them,” she said firmly, taking them from his fingertips and walking over to the counter where the clerk stood waiting.

Billy watched her go, blinking, his hands slowly lowering to his sides. He looked down at the blue carpet under his worn sneakers and felt his heart race. His sense that he didn’t deserve this kindness warred with his desire to appreciate this gesture, to revel in the fact that Susan was keeping her promise to protect, help, and love him.

Max nudged him and he looked up at her.

“Hey, space cadet, Mom’s calling you,” she said, rolling her eyes and joining Susan at the counter. He looked at them, standing side by side, Max almost rivalling her mother in height nowadays. Susan had grown dear to him, and he realized in that moment that Max had always been dear to him, even if he’d screwed up showing it. Love wasn’t straightforward when all you’d known was fear and violence. It took confusing and twisted shapes, knotting itself into half-statements and significant looks, into a begrudging yes-and-no love. Without realizing it, he had spent the last year unknotting his heartstrings, patiently untangling fear into trust. He had begun to believe in promises again, and had begun to believe in hope.

He walked over to the counter and joined his little family.

Steve waved to Billy across the food court, holding his tray of A&W and walking over to sit with him, Susan and Max. He sat down and smiled widely at them. They were going to meet Robin, Nancy, and Harley later on to do some Christmas shopping. Max and Susan were going to head back to Hawkins soon, but he'd come a little early, his business taking less time than he'd thought.

"Hey guys," he greeted as he adjusted himself on the plastic chair. "How're you, Miss Mayfield?"

Susan chuckled, shaking her head at Steve.

"Miss Mayfield is doing good," she said, smiling. Steve had stopped calling her Mrs. Hargrove in his head a long time ago.

"And the other Miss Mayfield?" he asked Max.

"Ugh, don't ever call me that," she said, grimacing. Steve chuckled into his fries, grabbing one and popping it into his mouth. He looked up and grinned at Billy.

"So— Lemme see," he prompted.

Billy rolled his eyes and pulled out a black case, opening it and unfolding a pair of gold rim glasses. He slid them onto his nose. Steve raised his eyebrows.

"Hey, those look good on you!" he complimented, taking a fry and dipping it in ketchup. "They make you look smart."

"At least I'll *look* smart," Billy snorted, reaching over and stealing a fry from Steve's tray.

"Hey!" Steve protested, his mouth full. He slapped Billy's hand gently as it pulled away.

"Sorry, stolen food just tastes better," Billy shrugged, giving Steve a mischievous smirk.

"Oh, well then..."

Steve reached across the table and yanked one of Billy's onion rings.

Billy's hand darted out to catch him, but was too late. Steve leaned back and bit into the onion ring, munching on it dramatically, his eyes lifting to the ceiling.

"Oh my God, you're right," Steve said through the food in his mouth. "It's heavenly."

Max's hand darted out and grabbed one of Billy's onion rings.

"Hey!" he called out indignantly as she popped it into her mouth.

"Oh my God, you're totally right, Billy!" she enthused. "It does taste better!"

"Alright...," Billy grumbled, rolling his eyes and taking off his glasses, putting them back in the case. Steve thought that was a little odd, as he was under the impression Billy needed them to see properly, but he kept his silence. Max eventually finished her dinner and she and her Mom left. Before they left the table, Billy stood and gave them each a brief, awkward hug. He watched his lips whisper something into Susan's ear before he pulled away and sat back down, waving to them as they walked away. Billy looked down at his last onion ring and Steve watched as his head bent slightly, bringing his thumbnail to his lips and worried at it gently.

Steve reached out and put a palm over his, briefly, giving it a light squeeze. Billy tended to bite his nails when he was anxious, and he wanted for him to talk about it instead of chewing off his nail beds. Billy laid his arms across each other on the table, lifting his head.

"How're you, Steve?" Billy asked, surprising him. Usually when Billy was moody like this he refused to talk. Then, maybe this was his way of getting out of it.

"Why?" Steve asked, taking a sip of his coke.

"What d'you mean, why?" Billy asked, snorting softly, a genuine smile on his lips. "I just wanna know how you're doin.'"

"You're not asking so you can avoid what's bothering you, right?" Steve asked, smiling, nudging him teasingly.

“I mean, kinda, but you been busy. I dunno how you been,” Billy said, shrugging. He paused for a few moments, then leaned in, speaking quietly.

“Just... Gimme a bit. I dunno how to say how... How I’m feelin,’ or whatever...”

His cheeks flushed a little but he ploughed on.

“And I miss you for some stupid reason, so tell me what you been up to,” he said, more loudly, smiling.

Steve shook his head, shrugging and smiling. “Okay, alright... I also miss you, for some dumb fucking reason...”

Steve stretched and yawned. “Well— Work’s okay. I got through the first of it, you know, the guys razzin’ me and treating me like a dancing monkey, and now I actually have to do work. It’s kinda weird, these cars kinda sell themselves. Like... Rich assholes come in from the retirement neighbourhoods outside of Hawkins to come buy them. Lots of older people. A few young couples who live outside of Indianapolis, you know the types... Young guys in business and a wife who wants a nice whip for doing whatever it is that she does...”

Steve chuckled.

“Though, there were these two ladies who came in, they were super hot man, like... I mean, unbelievably attractive. One was in this sharp skirt suit thing... And the other lady had this like... Short, kinda cool haircut and she walked in with her suit jacket over her shoulder and her sleeves rolled up, right? They bought this sick new model, like brand new, and paid in cash.”

Steve smiled at Billy, taking a sip of his drink.

“I was thinking that... Well. D’you think they were maybe—?”

“Lesbians?” Billy said, smirking.

“Yeah.”

“Definitely,” Billy snorted. “Definitely lesbians.”

“What about lesbians?”

Robin, Harley, and Nancy seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, Robin leaning down over their table and beaming widely.

“Oh shit, we summoned them,” Billy grinned, yanking Robin down into a rough embrace. “How you doin,’ ladies?”

“Ugh,” Nancy sighed heavily, walking over to sit beside Steve and slumping in the chair. She looked exhausted. “Exams are finally over...”

“Oh, come on, you aced them, Nance...,” Steve smiled at her, putting his arm around her shoulder.

“I hope so...” she muttered. Harley slid into the chair beside Billy, yawning widely as Robin settled herself on Billy’s lap.

“I actually found second year exams easier than the first year ones, to be honest,” Harley said. “I think they make ‘em a little harder in first year to scare little freshmen off...”

She leaned in to Nancy, making an exaggerated monster face and holding her fingers like claws, grinning, shaking Nancy jokingly.

“Well, if I pass all of them then nothing will scare me ever again,” Nancy sighed, laughing as Harley clutched her teasingly.

“You’ll do great,” Harley assured her, leaning back.

“And how did you do on your exams, miss?” Billy asked Robin, bouncing her on his knee like a small child.

Robin snorted. “Uh, hopefully good. I mean... I might have flunked my psych one, but....”

“Oh, not this again,” Harley exclaimed, exasperated. “You didn’t flunk!”

“I totally might have!” Robin protested.

Steve shook his head, smiling as Robin and Harley exchanged a

teasing argument about Robin's grades. He put his head on Nancy's shoulder and looked up at her through his eyelashes, pouting. She rolled her eyes, smiling softly back.

"And how are you, Steve?" Nancy asked.

He shrugged. Across from them, Billy had gotten involved in Harley and Robin's silly, teasing argument and was laughing, shoving the last onion ring on his tray into his face, crumbs sitting on his lips as he laughed loudly, his voice garbling behind the food in his mouth.

Eventually it was settled that Robin had a 99.9999 (ad infinitum) percent chance of passing her exam and the group moved on from the food court, wandering slowly around without any real purpose. Their vague plan had been to do some Christmas shopping, but really they just all missed each other. Ahead of him, Billy was arm in arm with Harley. He caught their conversation as he meandered behind, still sipping on his coke. Robin and Nancy were walking on his left, chatting.

"Are you gonna be in Hawkins over your break?" Billy asked.

"Aw, naw, Baby Blue," Harley said, rubbing his arm. "I'm going back home for the month. Mom and Dad miss me a lot, you know?"

"Yeah," Billy said. "How's your Mom and Dad, anyways? And Jodi?"

"Oh, they're both great. They bought a house two years ago!"

"Shit, good for them," Billy said, smiling softly at Harley. Steve knew that Harley's place had been a safe haven for him at one time. Obviously her parents loved her very much. A kid like Billy would have probably been desperate to be around that kind of love.

"And Jodi's in her freshman year of high school, isn't that wild?" she said, shaking her head.

"I know, Max just finished hers. She just started sophomore year..."

"Crazy..."

He listened to them talk, enjoying hearing Billy reminisce and laugh

about happier times from his younger years. He couldn't imagine growing up the way Billy had, in a constant state of fear, but it felt nice to know that his life hadn't been totally bad. He'd had a few good, happy times, even while he was going through hell. Eventually, Robin sprinted forward and dragged Harley and Billy into Sam Goody. Beside him, Nancy laughed softly and they followed lazily behind them. They stopped at a tape display, Nancy moving to the other side of the low shelves. She folded her arms across the top of the display, gazing at him over the stacks of cassettes.

"So," Nancy said quietly, so that only he could hear. "You never answered me. How have you been?"

Steve's brow furrowed as his hands absentmindedly flicked across the rectangular covers, his fingertips dancing on the thin plastic seals. He couldn't quite understand why she was speaking so low, but he answered her anyway.

"Uh, good. Y'know, job's keeping me busy..."

Nancy gave him a significant look, raising his eyebrows, like she was accusing him of lying. He blinked and raised his hands, giving her a bemused smile. "What? I *am* busy!"

She hummed, still giving him that strange look over the top of the shiny plastic sign that declared the cassettes were on sale 20 percent off.

"What is this, what's this look for? Stop it, Nance, you're freakin' me out," he said, a little annoyed.

She let out a small frustrated noise in her throat and stood straight, taking him gently by the arm and marching him over to the headphones along the back wall. Absent-mindedly, Steve noted that the pair he'd broken last fall were still broken, a little sign above them saying 'Out of Order.' He swallowed, feeling a little delayed guilt as Nancy stood him in front of a set of big black headphones and leaned in.

"I think you're in love," she said, very quietly, barely above a whisper.

Steve's heart stopped dead in his chest and re-started again. He looked around, craning his neck, terrified someone had heard her, when he realized too late that nowhere did she say anything about the person he was apparently in love with. To anyone listening, it could have been a girl. He forced his shoulders to relax.

"What?" he demanded, snorting with forced laughter.

"In love," Nancy insisted.

"With who?" he asked, pretending like it was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard. "Come on, my pickings are kinda slim here... Three out of the three girls I actually know are not options..."

Nancy gave him a stern look, pursing her lips. He watched as her eyes flicked over to Billy, Harley, and Robin, who were over by the vinyl section.

Steve's blood froze in his veins but he played dumb.

"What?" he asked her, chuckling, looking out across the store. "Am I in love with the clerk or something?"

"Steve, I'm not stupid," she sniffed, her voice low. Steve's face fell. He got rid of the act, turning to face Nancy, his expression grim.

"No," he agreed quietly. "No, you're not."

He felt a little betrayed. Had Robin told her? He'd told her that in confidence...

"Who told you?" he asked, keeping the emotion out of his voice. He had a feeling that Nancy wouldn't be too pleased that she'd dated a guy like him, who also liked guys... Some girls didn't like that. He wanted to believe that Nancy was above all that, but... Maybe she wasn't.

Her eyebrows furrowed.

"Nobody told me," she said quietly, a tiny smile on the corner of her lips.

“Nobody—You’re not lying?” he asked, his heart thudding in his chest.

“Steve,” she said, sounding almost wounded, a pained and loving expression on her face. He had come to dislike that expression, even though he knew it was petty of him. That was the way she’d said his name when they’d been dating and she’d tried to comfort him even as she knew what was going to happen, could see what ways he was actively fucking it up but was destined to do it that way anyhow. It was the look she’d given him after she’d read his doomed college entrance essay, after he’d told her he wanted to be around for her senior year; that pitying look that knew which way things were headed but wanted to soften the blow.

She was smart. She probably just figured it out. She had probably known well before he had.

“Well,” he said, his voice low, his head hanging. “Sorry, I guess.”

“Sorry for what?” she asked, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“I dunno… Everything? Sorry I’m… The way that I am… That I… That I wanna be with…”

He couldn’t finish his sentence.

Nancy said nothing, and eventually he looked up into her face. She had tears in her eyes.

“Steve,” she said quietly. “You… You didn’t think that I wouldn’t… That I would hate you for…”

He felt like a fucking idiot. *Of course* his Nancy, his smart, sharp, beautiful Nancy would still care about him. *Of course* she wouldn’t care that he had moved on, and with someone a little unexpected.

“I—I dunno why I thought that, I’m just… To be honest, I’m fucking terrified about it all,” he told her in a rush, his voice very low, letting out a nervous chuckle.

She wiped her eyes roughly and shook her head. “Don’t be,” she said quietly. “Whatever happens… I love you, okay?”

Steve held her shoulders. Nancy had said she loved him many times when they had dated, but looking back he'd realized she hadn't meant any of them. This time, she *meant it.* It wasn't the way he'd wanted back then, but it was what he felt blessed to have in a real way now that he needed it the most.

"I love you too," he said.

The deep orange sun laid down low among the flat and endless fields stretching for miles on either side of the highway, catching fire in the rear view mirrors of Steve's car and glittering on the frost clinging to the broken chaff and razed corn stalks like jewels on a chandelier. Steve turned his head as the last reddish wintry fingers of light stretched long on the frozen earth and stole a glance at Billy. He was looking out the window, his wayward curls pressed against the headrest. His blue eyes were half lidded and caught the fire of the sunset like sparks. He wasn't wearing his glasses. Steve looked away, back down the darkening stretch of road, turning his wheels and gently passing a transport truck that sighed down the pavement. He switched back into the right lane, his hand hovering uncertainly on the gearshift, tapping it softly. He wanted to touch Billy, but he was nervous and unsure. The radio was playing quietly, and he only caught half the melody.

Steve noticed they were quieter more often when they were together. He was worried that maybe it was because Billy was done with him, that he was ready to move on and ignore him... But then again, maybe Billy was just comfortable enough to enjoy silence with him. Steve recognized the constant ribbing and insults when they first met for what they were; the anxious, pissed off ramblings of a guy who didn't know how to make friends and only knew how to get people's attention by razzing them.

"Jesus, do you ever shut up?" he'd demanded once.

Apparently, Billy shut up when he was comfortable. He and Billy had that in common.

"I do miss you, y'know," he said quietly, looking briefly over to Billy.

Billy turned his head and looked at him, an amused smile wrinkling his eyes and the corners of his mouth. He leaned an elbow against the side of the door.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Steve snorted softly. “I dunno. My shifts were kinda weird back at the Family Video, y’know? I’d get random Tuesday’s or Thursday’s off, and I’d be at home on a weekday just thinking *‘Man, wish Billy was here right now,’* and then I’d call you and you’d always be there and we’d hang.”

Steve’s cheeks flushed. He had no idea where he was going with this. His fear of Billy leaving him behind crashed explosively with the knowledge that he wanted to kiss Billy so badly sometimes he felt like he was on fire… And still he wasn’t brave enough to tell him yet.

Billy was very quiet.

“Yeah,” he agreed, after a while. “I never really knew when you’d be free, so I was always like… Just kinda waitin.’ And when you called on a random Tuesday, it was… I dunno. Fun, I guess. Just… Fun.”

“Do… Do you still think we have fun?” Steve asked him, his heart beating painfully in his chest.

“Yeah, of course,” Billy said, laughing like what Steve had said was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard.

“I mean, I’m just checking,” Steve protested, laughing too. He licked his lips. “I dunno, I… Okay. You’re gonna think I’m stupid, but… I guess I’ve just been worried that you’re gonna wanna stop hanging around me ‘cause everything is different now, you know? You can do whatever you want, go wherever you want… See whoever you want… Your Dad’s gone, and… You’re free.”

“I am free,” Billy said softly, as though it had just occurred to him that this was the case. He let out a small sigh, one that sounded relieved and sad. He turned to Steve, his brows furrowing.

“I’m not gonna ask what makes you think I’d stop hangin’ with you, after everything you done for me…”

"You don't owe me—" Steve protested hastily.

"I know," Billy interrupted. "I know that. I'm not hangin' with you 'cause I feel like I gotta, or whatever... I wanna hang with you 'cause... I never met anybody I like as much as you."

Steve almost leapt out of the car, feeling frozen and very warm all at once. He peered quickly over to Billy's face and he was looking ahead into the windshield, his head bent a little. The sun had finally disappeared below the horizon and the cab of the car was cast in the navy grey haze of fading light. Steve looked back at the highway, focusing on the taillights scattered across the road like ruby eyes shining in the darkness. He felt elated and terrified.

"Same here," was all Steve could muster. His hand on the gearshift drifted over and held the worn denim over Billy's knee. After a few moments, he felt Billy's fingers wrapping themselves over the top of his palm. Billy's free hand rose, his thumbnail sitting on his pink lips. After a few moments, he let his hand fall, swallowing hard. Eventually he spoke.

"You're gonna think..."

Billy turned away.

"Nevermind."

Steve swallowed.

"What's up?" Steve prompted quietly.

"You'll think I'm a fuckin' idiot," Billy said, snorting derisively.

"What is it?" Steve pressed.

"Sometimes... I miss my Dad," Billy said, all at once. He seemed to freeze in his seat after this confession, as though he had spoken something terrible in the sight of God, had spoken some cardinal sin into being by opening his mouth. Steve blinked several times, his statement bounding around in his head. His first reaction was to tell Billy he shouldn't miss a bastard like that, but... That was coming from him, who had parents who loved him despite their faults and

had his best interests at heart. He thought about Billy's Mom, the sadness and rage he'd felt when he'd lost her. In a way, he supposed, he had lost Neil too.

"I don't think you're stupid," Steve said calmly, giving his knee a squeeze. He really didn't know what else to say, but he wouldn't pretend to know how Billy felt about his Dad and what kind of complex feelings he must have had.

"My Dad wasn't always this bad," Billy began, but then stopped. "Actually... No. He was always this bad."

Steve stayed quiet and let him think.

"Back in L.A., our neighbour was this old lady with a bad leg. He'd fix her porch for her, and he'd cut her grass, and he was always nice to her. And he was really good to Susan and Max, before we came here. He laughed a lot more. And... Sometimes, before I had my own car, he'd let me take his, or drive with me, and he'd get me fries and we'd talk about cars and shit... I... I dunno..."

Steve swallowed hard, and thought about Tommy.

"Tommy once came over, and stayed with me when I had the flu," Steve said, licking his lips. "My parents were gone, and I was alone. We watched movies. He made me food. He ended up getting sick, but..."

Steve looked out onto the highway and felt a little hollow, like this memory knocked at the place where his affection for Tommy had once lived and found it empty, an abandoned house that he'd once loved.

"I know it's not the same..."

"No," Billy said, sighing quietly. "You get it... A part of me just kinda thinks... If I'd have been different, maybe my Dad woulda treated me good all the time instead of just sometimes, y'know? Maybe it was... Maybe it was me... You know?"

"I promise it wasn't you," Steve said firmly. "You were just as human as he was and you were young and didn't know better. He failed you,

Billy."

Billy let out a frustrated breath or air.

"Yeah, I know! I know all this stuff is true... I know he's a monster... But I still... Want him to *like* me."

Steve deflated.

No matter how much he himself had grown from the asshole who had called Nancy a slut, no matter how much he was happy his life had changed... When his Dad had smiled at him, shaking his hand, welcoming him to the dealership... It made Steve feel happy. It had made him feel proud that his Dad was proud of him– Relieved even. Billy was never going to get that from Neil.

"I know," Steve said, sniffing.

"And I know it's fuckin' dumb!" Billy grumbled. "He's a piece of shit! He literally hurt and destroyed everything that I fuckin' love, including me, and still this dumb part of my head thinks that maybe some day he'll realize he was wrong and— and love me, like he was supposed to! But that's never gonna happen, and it makes me... So fuckin' angry. So... Pissed off."

"I dunno," Steve said, shrugging a little. "I guess you're... Grieving, you know? It's like he's gone and you're never gonna get to tell him all this shit, just like... Well..."

"My Mom," Billy finished for him, flatly.

"Yeah," Steve said.

"I'm just fuckin' sick," Billy said, his throat constricted, "Of people leavin' me."

Steve didn't know what to say, so he kept holding Billy's knee, and let him sniff wetly in the relative silence.

"I mean... I push people away too, it's my fuckin' fault, but..."

"Hey, man, you were just protecting yourself and other people, right?

You wouldn't've had to do that if everything hadn't been so fucked..."

"Yeah...," Billy said. Steve looked over at him briefly. He was staring down at his sneakers, a deep frown on his face. He was crying.

Steve looked back at the road. His hand rubbed gentle circles into Billy's knee.

"You aren't wearing your glasses," Steve said eventually, changing the subject, moving onto the ramp at the Hawkins exit. The engine geared down to a hum as he pulled onto the circuit road.

"It's dark," Billy shrugged nonchalantly, lifting his head and sniffing, wiping his nose with the back of his free hand.

"Yeah, it's dark, but... You should probably wear 'em, don't you think?" Steve prompted.

He had a funny feeling that Billy wasn't wearing his new glasses for a lot of reasons, one of them being vanity, but another being that maybe, on some level, he just wasn't ready.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll wear 'em," Billy grumbled.

Steve picked a random side road and turned down it. It was only seven in the evening and the winter dark had closed in fast. He wasn't ready to drop Billy off yet and go home. He missed Billy terribly, more somehow since he'd gotten his day job. The hours weren't actually all that different, but Steve had realized something about himself and his feelings in the interim and that made the days extra long when he knew he couldn't come home and see Billy and be around him. Steve knew it was kinda hokey and stupid, but... He wanted to come home every night and for Billy to be there, grumbling, smoking a cigarette as they ate dinner, laugh in his arms when they watched TV, doze to sleep like grandparents in a bed they shared... He felt like he should be thinking a lot more about what it meant to be a guy who also liked guys instead of having silly domestic fantasies about a man who he hadn't even told about it all yet, but... He couldn't help himself. He was soft at heart, under all his pretence, and the thought of opening his eyes in the morning and

seeing Billy beside him was something that thrilled him.

“You do look really good in them,” Steve assured, clearing his throat quietly, thankful that it was dark in the cab of the car so Billy couldn’t see how red his cheeks were.

“Thanks,” Billy mumbled, sounding not thankful at all.

“Hey— What’s up?” Steve asked, sighing. “Come on, don’t be grumpy... I know you got a rule about feelings... One feeling per conversation—“

Billy let out a little bark of laughter.

“But come on, let’s break the rules. What’s goin’ on?”

“You know, there was a time when you’d just drop it instead of fuckin’ ... Needlin’ me about it,” Billy said, snorting. He sounded halfway between annoyed and amused.

“Yeah, and that was back when wild horses couldn’t drag out of you what was wrong, and I didn’t care about you the way I care about you now,” Steve said, chuckling softly.

“Ugh,” Billy said, putting his head back against the headrest. He sounded aggravated but there was a little smile flickering on his lips. “Fine...”

Billy lit a cigarette, moving his hand away from Steve’s where it sat on his knee. After it was lit, he moved it back down, turning his hand so that he was holding Steve’s, their fingers entwined. Steve’s heart fluttered and he adjusted himself in his seat, feeling a bit of heat run down his belly and sit in his lap. God... Holding hands had never made him feel like this... He tamped down his thoughts, which whispered lewdly that his hand was only mere inches away from Billy’s—

“It’s just weird,” Billy said, interrupting Steve’s rapidly declining train of thought.

“Whut?” he asked dumbly. His brain hit a brick wall and reorganized itself, rifling through the past few moments to recall what they’d

been talking about. Love really did make you dumb...

“The glasses, you mean?” Steve asked, speaking clearly, trying to hide the fact that he had briefly short circuited. He kept his eyes glued on the road ahead so he could try and forget about where his hand was. He’d asked for vulnerability from Billy. The least he could do was actually listen to him.

“Yeah,” Billy shrugged. “Seein’ again... Glasses... Dad gone... Scars...”

Steve could feel Billy‘s breath on him as he gently exhaled smoke through his nose. Steve got a whiff of his cigarettes and his mind calmed, like the familiar smell invaded his body and let him know that Billy was there, that he was with the person he loved.

“You...” Billy whispered softly.

“M-Me?” Steve asked, confused, finally risking a look over to Billy. He was looking right at him, his eyes hooded, his lips parted. The cigarette smouldered in his right hand, the orange cherry reflecting in the window.

“Yeah,” Billy said, looking away and down at their hands. “Everything’s different.”

“Good different or bad different?” Steve asked, even though he dreaded the answer.

Billy paused and thought.

“I think good,” he said eventually. “And I guess that’s... The weirdest part.”

Steve had the thought, once again, that Billy didn’t know what happiness looked like— Not really. There hadn’t been a consistent, good thing in his life for a very long time. Steve let out a little chuckle.

“You know, the first day you got to Hawkins, when you got out of the car? You looked at me and Nancy, and I just got this feeling. I won’t lie, it wasn’t a good feeling, but it was... I dunno how to describe it. We’ve had new students before, y’know... Like Chelsea Dunsworth,

she was new the year before you got here. But... I never got the feeling about someone new the way I got a feeling about you. It felt like something... Changed when you got here."

Steve paused, shrugging self-consciously. "I dunno. I'm probably just crazy."

"I picked you out, before I knew anything about you," Billy said, tilting his head, an ironic smile on his face. "I looked across the parking lot and I saw you and Nancy and thought *'He's the one I gotta beat to get these assholes to like me.'"*

Steve's eyebrows raised to his hairline. That was an unbelievably vulnerable thing for him to say. He knew now that Billy cared a lot about whether people liked him or not, was obsessed with it even, but his mind hadn't made the connection between this fact that he knew now and the way Billy had been before. Of course it would've been the same back then, only hidden better.

"Well, wasn't too hard," Steve chuckled at him. "Tommy was already kinda sick of me and I wasn't really popular anymore anyways..."

"No, wasn't too hard," Billy agreed, smiling. He tapped his cigarette out the window, putting it back to his lips. He seemed to chew on his thoughts for a few moments before speaking up hesitantly.

"I'm glad... I mean, it feels..."

He paused, trying again.

"I just mean... I was... I was really, really mad, at everyone... At everything... And I'm just grateful you gave me a second chance."

Steve had been annoyed with Billy, upset with Billy, angry with him... But he'd never really hated him. He'd never truly hated anything in his life until he'd confronted the darkness of the Upside Down, and he wasn't about to start hating other human beings when he knew what lurked below.

"Let's just say... I didn't know about what you were goin' through, but... Everyone whose a dick is usually a dick for a reason... Y'know?" Steve said. He paused, snorting. "I mean, maybe not

everyone... Tommy's just a spoiled brat, but I guess even that's a reason... Hell. That's why I was a dick. I was a spoiled shithead who was bored and used to getting what I wanted... We all got reasons for being the way we are."

"I guess," Billy muttered, rubbing his lip absently with his forefinger. He flicked the cigarette out the window and shut it. "I never thought... I never thought that I'd..."

Steve heard Billy's voice crack and he looked at him. Billy turned to him, swallowing hard.

"I never thought things would be okay," he said quietly. "Like... Ever. I just feel like it's wrong, y'know? Like I don't deserve it..."

"You didn't get all this for free, you know," Steve said, looking back at the road, clutching onto Billy's hand tighter. "You worked to be this way, you... You made choices. All this... All this wouldn't have happened if you weren't willing to work hard to be better..."

Billy bent his head.

He didn't say anything, but Steve felt him caressing his fingers softly.

"Yeah," he said eventually. "I know you told me this shit back in L.A., I just... I feel like something's gonna happen and it's all gonna go away, you know?"

"No way," Steve assured him, laughing quietly. "They'll have to pry all this good shit in your life from my cold, dead fingers."

"Don't tempt fate like that, Harrington," Billy snorted softly, lifting his head.

Steve smiled at him.

They had both done work, *hard work,* to be the people that they were now, and their work would never be over... But this fact calmed Steve more than it intimidated him. He was excited to see himself change, see Billy change... His heart wanted to be by Billy's side, to grow together, entwined like trees planted near, their branches caressing one another as they grew tall and strong.

He drove toward Cherry Oak drive and let himself get lost in the feeling of Billy's hand in his.

20. "Town Called Malice" - The Jam (1982)

December 14th, 1986

Steve was sweaty and nervous as he climbed the short step ladder. It was propped up in front of an overlarge Christmas tree that reached into the rafters of the living room ceiling. He put an ornament on one of the boughs, swearing under his breath. It was during the month of December that Sandra Harrington was in her element, her schedule chocked so full of events, parties, gatherings, meetings, and countless other tasks that the handling of Christmas in her own home was often left alone to Steve. He adjusted the ornament carefully and wiped his damp hands on his jeans, stepping back down the ladder and licking his lips. It was only one in the afternoon, but for some reason he was feeling unbelievably anxious about having Billy over for dinner with his parents later on that evening. While his Mom never really did anything halfway, he was at least expecting her to do something that (for her, at least) was on the casual side of things… But something seemed to have possessed her and she had woken him up around nine, bustling around, cleaning and cooking and freshening the house up as if she was hosting the head of the Hawkins Women's Council or the chair of the board for the country club. He tried to remind her that it was just Billy who was coming over and that he'd be happy with anything she did, but she refused to hear anything about it.

The more he thought about his Mom's sudden burst of energy, the more it made him nervous. His Mom tended to only voluntarily bustle about at home when something was bothering her, and Steve couldn't help but feel like *he* was the reason she was hanging around at home making her house look like a showroom. He took another ornament from the box and stepped up on the stool, hanging it on a branch. He heard his Mom rummaging in the hallway closet, and the snap of the wooden shuttered doors as she closed them. She strode into the living room, wearing a blue house dress and a pair of slippers, her blonde hair piled onto her head and dragging the vacuum.

"Oh, don't forget the lights, sweetheart," she said.

"Mom," he said, coming down the ladder. "Why are you doing this?"

“What do you mean, dear?” she asked, pulling the cord on the vacuum and plugging it into the wall.

“All...”

Steve gestured around the room, which had been cleaned and dusted within an inch of its life, and all the Christmas decorations put up.

“This.”

His Mom gave him a small smile and turned the vacuum on. Steve rolled his eyes and grabbed another ornament moodily, hanging it on the tree in a way he knew his Mom would fix later when no one was looking. When the vacuum finally turned off and she pulled the plug from the wall, she answered him.

“Your father is going to ask Billy if he’d like to apprentice under Doug in the garage,” she explained.

Steve stepped down off of the stool, amazed. “What? Really?”

“Sure is,” Sandra said, turning around and smiling at him. “He was very impressed with the work he could do. You know the dealership is looking for another mechanic, and Doug wants to retire soon.”

Steve was floored. “How come nobody told me this?” he demanded.

“Well, your father wanted to take him on a while ago, but he wasn’t sure about his sight, and had to okay it with the rest of the guys there,” she said, flicking a lock of her hair out of her face and wrapping the cord expertly around the vacuum.

“So... You’re making the house look clean and presentable because Dad’s gonna offer Billy a job?” Steve asked, still a little confused. He was delighted his Dad was doing Billy a solid like this, but he still didn’t see the connection between all the tidying and Billy coming by for dinner.

“Well, sort of,” Sandra shrugged. She clicked the vacuum into an upright position and held onto it, brushing away non-existent dust on the beige plastic surface, looking down, her bracelets jingling. She seemed to want to say something to him, her lips pursing and her

brows furrowing gently. He could practically see the words she wanted to say sitting on the edge of her tongue. His Mom and Dad loved him, and when he was a kid they'd been close... But they hadn't really been close for a long time now.

"Steven," she said, haltingly. "I know I'm not always home, and I know I'm always busy, but... You can talk to me. You know that, right?"

She looked up and into Steve's face. He swallowed.

"Yeah," he said, his heart hammering in his chest. "I know."

"Okay," Sandra said, giving him a smile and reaching out to touch him on his shoulder. "I'm proud of you, sweetie."

"Oh. Uh. Thanks," Steve said uncomfortably, alarmed. His Mom never talked like this...

"Billy is a... Very nice young man," she said, tilting the vacuum. "I like him a lot. And so does your father."

She pushed the vacuum out of the room, its wheels squeaking, leaving behind a flabbergasted Steve. He didn't even register the phone ringing and his Mom answering it loudly. He stood in the middle of the room between the giant Christmas tree and the sofa, his brain short circuiting. Did his Mom... *Know?* Had she somehow figured out that... That he...

"Steven!"

He jumped and looked up at his Mom. She was leaning around the wall looking into the living room, holding the phone away from her ear.

"Sweetheart, Mr. Downes isn't feeling well this year, you know how he's been sick? Would you mind terribly going to his place and taking his truck to put up the wreaths on Main Street?"

"But what about the tree?"

"Oh, don't worry about that, I'll finish it!"

Steve knew when he was being volun-told to do something.

“Yeah,” he sighed. At least it would pass the time.

“Oh, you may as well pick Billy up too, dear— By the time you boys will be done, dinner will be ready.”

Steve looked at his Mom, mystified, and she gave him a wide, encouraging grin. Then, she put the phone to her ear and turned around, going into the hallway, chatting away loudly with one of her friends.

Steve slowed down alongside the jagged roadside, the bare poplar trees swaying above the cab of Mr. Downes’ truck as he pulled down on the gearshift and parked. It was flurrying softly, big fat chunks of snow fluttering down from the bright grey sky. He opened the door of the truck and hopped down, grinning, looking across the street. Outside of the little white house on Cherry Oak drive, Billy and Max were winding a long string of lights along the front windows of the house. He jogged across the street, calling out to them.

“Hey!” he greeted as he crossed onto the lawn.

Billy and Max turned their heads.

“Oh, hey!” Billy greeted, smiling at him. On his head was the old knitted hat that he'd given him last Christmas, the blue bobble on top flopping back and forth as he moved his head.

“Hey Steve!” Max greeted, her arms stretched above her head. Billy was standing on a short ladder and holding a staple gun. “Can you hold this?” Max asked, grunting. “I’m not tall enough...”

“Oh, sure.”

He walked forward and took the string of lights from her, raising them up to Billy’s height. He tilted his head and looked up at Billy, and couldn’t help but smile. The last thing he’d expected him to be doing on a Saturday when he could do anything he pleased was helping his little sister put up Christmas lights. Billy smiled back, toeing the line between cocky and embarrassed, his mouth smirking

but his eyes soft and full of mischief.

“How come you’re here so early?” Billy asked, turning his head to the staple gun and lights in his hands. He phrased it half-teasingly, like a joking complaint, but Steve heard the undercurrent. He was happy to see him. Billy clicked the gun against the siding and attached the lights in place.

“Well, my Mom kinda volun-told me to put up the wreaths on Main Street for the parade next week,” Steve explained, shuffling down the line as Billy stepped down, adjusting the string, then stepped back up on the ladder. “And she said to take you with me.”

Billy gave him an amused look, furrowing his eyebrows. “What?”

“Yeah, I dunno,” Steve chuckled, looking away from Billy’s face, his cheeks turning red. He had a feeling he knew exactly why his Mom had told him to go pick up Billy early, though he was still a little amazed that she seemed to have figured it out. Maybe she’d walked into his room while they were sleeping the other week... The thought made his heart jump into his throat and he vowed to lock his door from now on. His Mom was one thing— she was easy and breezy about most people’s ways of life— but his Dad... He just wasn’t sure if his Dad could handle that sight. It wasn’t totally out of the realm of possibilities that his Dad had an inkling of what was going on and was relatively okay with it, but Steve knew that if he ever found out the hard truth, it might take him a long time to come to terms with it.

At least his reaction would be better than Neil’s had been…

They chatted amicably as they strung the lights, Max watching them and occasionally helping them by running back and grabbing more from inside, holding plugs together as they did the windows and porch. When they finally stepped back and looked at the house, Steve started to laugh.

They’d gone... A little overboard.

The entire front of the house, from top to bottom, was covered with large coloured twinkling lights, stapled to the white wooden shingles

in rows.

“Oops,” Max said, giggling.

“I mean, you did buy pretty much every fuckin’ string of lights that K-Mart had,” Billy snorted.

“It’s like a firework exploded on your house,” Steve chuckled.

“Hey, this is our first time doing this! Don’t be mean!” Max exclaimed.

“I’m not bein’ mean! It’s beautiful!” he grinned at her. He flicked his eyes over to Billy to see his reaction. His hands were in his pockets, the glowing colourful light bulbs tinting his skin merrily in warm, bright shades that were soft against the grey sky and fluttering snow. Billy caught him looking, and smirked at him. Steve swallowed lightly, smiling back.

“If you guys are just gonna stand there making googly eyes at each other, I’m gonna go in,” Max warned flatly, leaning over to give them each a look. Steve looked away, his heart thudding. Billy turned to her.

“We’re not makin’ googly eyes, shitbird,” he said, rolling his eyes, annoyed. Steve’s brain short circuited. Max had *no idea.*

Or... Maybe she did? His Mom’s odd behaviour and half-insinuations had popped his confidence about his subtlety like a knife to a balloon. Maybe he wasn’t being subtle at all... Maybe it was obvious? He hoped not. That would be a little embarrassing...

“Looked like googly eyes to me,” Max muttered under her breath as she walked up the steps and into the house, flipping her hair.

Billy shook his head, putting his hands on his hips.

Steve changed the subject.

“Well... You don’t have to, but if you want, I could definitely use your help putting up those wreaths,” he said, shrugging.

“Yeah, alright,” Billy said, inclining his head. Max came back out of the house, holding a camera.

“Can you take my picture in front of the lights?” Max asked, holding the camera out to Billy.

Steve smiled and took it instead.

“You go stand with her, I can take it,” Steve said. Max sprinted up to the living room window. Billy blinked once, smirking lightly, and joined her. He draped an arm around her shoulders, grinning, and held the top of Max’s head with his palm like he were an alien sucking out her brain. Max made a funny face, sticking her tongue out of the side of her mouth like a zombie.

Steve gazed at them through the lens and felt his stomach flip in a thrilling and beautiful way. He found himself hoping, with all his heart, for the rest of his years to be filled with moments like this, moments where he gazed through a lens and saw love and was fortunate enough to be the one to capture it.

He smiled softly, and took a picture.

Steve carefully attached a wreath to the side of the telephone pole that stretched up beside Melvald’s. Below, holding the ladder with one hand and an armful of green wreaths in the other, was Billy. Steve carefully climbed back down. Billy let go and Steve took the ladder, moving on to the next pole and leaning it against the electric metal lamp. He climbed up and Billy held it secure, looping an arm around it, staring up at him as he handed him a wreath.

“Thanks again for helping me,” Steve said, not knowing what else to say. They’d spent the last half hour working in relative silence. It hadn’t been an uncomfortable silence, but Steve had always struggled with silences. His emotions were fluttering around his head like a caged bird, doubt and excitement ricocheting in his ribcage with every thrum of his heart.

“No problem,” Billy shrugged. “I don’t really got a lot to do... Guess I should get a job soon, huh? Especially ‘cause the house is definitely

gonna go to my Dad...”

Steve stayed quiet and attached the wreath to the pole with the metal clamps that had been installed there for this exact purpose. He couldn’t ruin the surprise. Plus, he had no idea if that’s what Billy actually wanted. Maybe he’d say no. Steve got down from the ladder and they moved on to the next pole.

“What d’you wanna do? For work, I mean,” he asked.

“Shit, I dunno, man... Lifeguarding’s seasonal and I don’t know enough about anything else...”

“That’s not true, Billy,” Steve scolded gently.

He climbed up and clamped the wreath. They moved down the street.

“I guess I just wanna make some money to help Max go to college,” Billy admitted, after a few moments, as Steve set the ladder against the next pole, sounding a little embarrassed.

“Really?” Steve asked, interested, taking a wreath from his arm.

“Yeah,” Billy shrugged. “I dunno. She wants to. She’s super fuckin’ smart, and she’d be the first person in the family to go.”

Steve smiled at the wreath as he climbed up and attached it to the pole.

“You’re proud of her,” Steve said, coming halfway down the ladder and regarding him, smiling.

“Well— Yeah,” Billy shrugged, his cheeks tinged in pink.

“She’s proud of you too,” Steve said seriously. “You know that, right?”

“I don’t deserve it,” he said, giving a half-shrug, avoiding Steve’s eyes. He twisted his lip. He swallowed.

“But I want to,” he said finally, looking back up at Steve. “To deserve

it, I mean. Make her proud."

Steve leaned an arm against a rung of the ladder and tilted his head, struck by Billy's quiet sincerity. He meant every word he was saying. Steve was touched.

"You will," he assured him. "You already do. I promise."

Steve watched with interest as Billy ate, sitting across from him at the dinner table, forking some of his potatoes to his mouth as Billy sliced his perfectly seared steak with a knife.

His table manners were *impeccable* .

Sandra Harrington would never have it said that her son's manners weren't up to scratch. Much to his chagrin as a child, he'd been constantly corrected on how he ate, where he held his fork, where his elbows went... But his manners had nothing on Billy's. It was as if he'd sat down at his Mom's perfectly laid out dinner and undergone a transformation. His shirt was buttoned properly, his back straight. His hair even seemed to have a glossier sheen, like a silky show dog that had just been groomed. He was politely chatting with his Mom and Dad, telling stories, charming and seeming completely at ease.

Steve had never seen this side of him before, ever. Usually Billy leaned back and smoked a cigarette when they had dinner together, shoving whatever was in front of him into his mouth in a casual and unconcerned way. He'd even been a little crass and more himself with his Mom's book club, and having dinner with the Byers'… But then, Jonathan and Will's Dad was long gone out of their lives and his own Dad hadn't been at his Mom's book club meeting. Steve swallowed his potatoes slowly and joined in late on a round of laughter that echoed in the dining room. He had no idea what Billy had said, but his Dad was now chuckling and getting up from the table, searching in the oak cupboard set into the wall behind his chair at the head of the table. He pulled out a bottle of scotch and three glasses, setting one down in front of his plate, his son, and Billy's.

"Now— Sandra likes her wine, but you seem like a scotch kind of

man," his Dad said jovially to Billy, unscrewing the bottle.

Sandra got up from the table and came bustling back in with a bucket of ice and a set of metal tongs. She plopped a couple ice cubes into her husband and son's glasses.

"Oh, do you want ice, dear?" Sandra asked Billy, an ice cube held in the tongs above his glass.

"Oh, no thank you, Mrs. Harrington, neat is just fine," Billy said, giving her a smile and nodding his head.

"No problem, sweetheart," she said, covering the bucket and sitting back down to her meal.

Steve stayed silent throughout the entirety of his steak, fascinated and confused by this polite person who was sitting in Billy's chair. As his Mom took their plates, Billy finally caught Steve's eye and gave him a ghost of a smirk, mischief twinkling in his eyes. Then, Steve felt a little pressure on his leg as Billy gave him a teasing, light kick under the table. Beside them, Donnie was yammering on about the new stock they were getting at the dealership, the clients... Obviously gearing up to ask Billy about the apprenticeship opportunity. Steve knew he should make sure that Billy's attention was a hundred percent on what his Dad was saying... But the opportunity to kick back was just *way* too tempting.

Billy looked at his Dad, nodding, smiling, sipping his scotch as his Mom came back in with desert, the smell of cinnamon and cooked apples wafting up deliciously from the plates. A dollop of ice cream slowly melted on the top of his apple crumble as he slid down surreptitiously in his chair and kicked Billy back, his toe jabbing into his calf. He watched as Billy's eyebrow twitched slightly, but his expression remained unchanged. He could tell that he wasn't really listening to his Dad. A glassy look had come over his eyes, his mind thinking revenge strategies. Steve straightened up, smiling, pretending to enjoy the conversation, taking a sip of his drink and digging into his dessert.

"So, a lot of us started this place together back in the day, but we're getting older now," his Dad sighed. "Especially the guys in the

garage. Doug's the head mechanic and he was older than me when we went into business together."

"Oh, really?" Billy asked, turning to his dessert and taking a bite.

"Yeah— Nothing but old fogies where we're at. Except for Steve and a couple of the new guys, of course," his Dad said, sipping his drink.

"Steve's the baby, huh?" Billy asked, looking up and smirking directly at Steve. Under the table, his foot shot out and jabbed him in the shin. Steve's mouth twitched momentarily, smiling back.

"Yup," he replied. "Youngest one there."

He jabbed Billy back.

"Well! I suppose we need young guys in there," his Dad chuckled, leaning back. "Always good to have new blood. People are tired of seeing our faces, that's for sure..."

Billy jabbed him but he ignored it, looking toward his Dad expectantly.

"Billy," his Dad began, leaning forward over his untouched desert. "I have a question for you."

Billy swallowed his desert and looked at Donnie, alarm brewing behind his eyes, instantly anxious but doing a good job of hiding it. Steve watched in sadness as Billy subtly leaned away from his Dad. He supposed his instincts from a lifetime of threats from an older guy didn't just disappear because the perpetrator was gone. He'd probably struggle with this until he was an older guy himself. Knowing it was good news, and not knowing what else to do, Steve slid his sock foot across the carpet and put it gently over Billy's. He knew it was weird and maybe not really that comforting, but he held his foot there, over top of his, applying gentle pressure. If his parents hadn't been there, he'd have taken his hand. This way, at the very least, he could sort of convey the comfort he wanted to give him. Thankfully, his Dad hadn't noticed that Billy had become nervous.

"When I talked to you this summer, I was really impressed with your knowledge. I think you have a talent for fixing cars, my friend."

Billy blinked owlishly, taking a napkin and dabbing his lips. “Oh! Well. I mean, I’ve been doing it all my life, and... I like to do it. It feels...”

Billy stopped, swallowing. He looked like he hadn’t meant to get expressive. “It’s something I enjoy,” he finished, ploughing on.

“Well, that’s good! That’s very good! See, I talked to Doug and he wants to retire soon, and I asked him if he’d be willing to take on an apprentice to take over for him when he does... Is that something you’d be interested in, Billy?”

Steve looked from his Dad to Billy’s face. His blue eyes had gone wide, his mouth open slightly.

“For—For real?” Billy asked, his demure, polite mannerisms dropping, sounding more like himself.

“Absolutely! I think you have a good eye for it and I think you’d be really successful.”

Billy closed his mouth, a small and genuine smile growing on his face as he looked at his Dad.

“Ye-Yeah!” Billy said, smiling. “I— Of course! I’d be... Thank you, Mr. Harrington!”

“Oh, stop. You call me Donnie. Lord knows you’ve been around here often enough,” his Dad chuckled, patting Billy lightly on the arm. “We’ll talk details later. It probably wouldn’t be until after Christmas anyways, so don’t worry about it ‘til then.”

“I—Thank you,” Billy said, again, swallowing. Steve smiled at him, sliding his foot away from the top of Billy’s and took a heaping spoonful of apple crumble, satisfied.

“Of course!” Donnie said, leaning back in his chair and finishing his drink. “You’re like family now.”

Steve thought this statement was a little strange, seeing as both his parents were gone all the time and they’d only talked to Billy a handful of times. He peered sidelong at his Mom, who was looking

down serenely at her apple crisp, taking a dainty spoonful. When she caught his eye, she gave him a demure little smile, and then looked away.

December 25th, 1986

Billy woke up late.

He rolled over and looked at the clock on his bedside table, squinting sleepily. It was eleven in the morning. He yawned and turned over, pulling his blankets up over his shoulders, closing his eyes and drifting back to sleep. Just as he got comfortable, there was a loud knock at his door.

“Billy!” Max yelled.

He groaned.

“Billy!” Max called again, opening his door.

“Mmmgph,” he moaned back.

“It’s Christmas, dummy! Wake up!”

“Mer’ Chrih-mus,” he muttered, yawning, still refusing to move or open his eyes. “G’night...”

“Oh my *God* ,” Max sighed, coming into the room. He was suddenly doused in cold air as Max flung the blankets off of him. He hissed, curling into himself, and lifted his head, giving her a grumpy look.

“You’re lucky I wore shorts to bed,” he grumbled.

She rolled her eyes at him. “Come on... Mom’s starting to cook dinner and we haven’t even opened presents yet.”

Billy moaned as he slowly sat up, scratching his head, disoriented, his hair sticking up at odd angles. A small headache was brewing behind his eyes. He and Steve had gotten a little too drunk the night before. Steve’s parents had met up with some friends, so he’d come over and had brought a large bottle of the hooch Mrs. Harrington pretended

she didn't make at the back of the wine cellar in her house. Billy smacked his lips, his mouth dry. He'd been way more hungover before, but if he didn't get some Advil and water into him quick he'd be suffering by dinner.

"Okay," he said, shivering. "I'm comin'..."

He pawed for his glasses on his bedside table, shoving them on his face. Then he stood up and Max handed him his robe hanging on the back of his door. He followed her out to the kitchen where Susan was just putting a small turkey into the oven.

"How are you?" Susan asked him, a teasing little smile on her face as she closed the oven door.

"Great," he said, giving her a pained smile and a weak thumbs up. He reached into the cupboard above the fridge and brought down a bottle of Advil, taking a couple pills. He went over to the sink and turned on the tap, dipping his head under the water and taking a drink. He popped the pills into his mouth and felt Susan brush by him, patting him soothingly on the shoulders as he lifted his head and swallowed.

"You two were *loaded* last night," she chuckled, leaning against the counter and crossing her arms.

"Yeah," Billy snorted softly, turning around, mirroring her. He watched Max root in the fridge and surreptitiously try to take one of his beers before they could notice.

"Nice try, shitbird, put the beer back," he scolded, grinning at her. "You're not legal yet."

"Neither are you," she said, grabbing a can of Coke instead, closing the fridge door and pulling on the tab. "Okay, are we gonna open the presents, or...?"

"Yes, now we can," Susan said, standing up straight.

"Okay," Max said, trying to sound casual, her excitement breaking through anyway. She was more mature than a lot of her friends, but she hadn't totally outgrown the excitement for gifts on Christmas yet.

He was glad that, at least, hadn't been ruined for her. She deserved to hold on to that glee for as long as she could. She turned around and wandered into the living room, where the Christmas tree was. He stood up straight and went to follow her when Susan put her hand on his shoulder.

"Billy," she said, her voice quiet and unsure.

"What's up?"

Susan bit her lip, looking down.

"I just want to tell you... That I didn't get anything for you," she said quietly, ashamed. "I'm sorry. I... I barely had though to get Max something, and—"

Billy put a hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay," he said. "Listen... These glasses and you divorcin' my Dad and not kickin' me out? That's a pretty good fuckin' gift."

She looked up and tilted her head, giving him a small smile.

"I'm proud of you," she said. Then, she hugged him.

Billy still felt like a beginner at all this hugging shit but he was lucky enough to now have a bit of practice. He hugged her back.

"Merry Christmas," she said, rubbing his back, pulling away.

"Merry Christmas," he repeated. He watched as she walked into the living room, joining Max, and looked around the kitchen. They were probably going to have to leave this house soon. He didn't often ask Susan the details of the divorce, as he found it almost too painful to think about, but he knew it wasn't going well. Neil had a higher paying job and was tenacious to the enth degree. Billy knew his Dad wouldn't stop until they had nothing, punishing Susan for daring to reveal him as the coward he was. He clenched his fists and set his jaw. Even if they lost this place, they'd find somewhere else. Then, he'd start working for Steve's Dad and everything would be right in the end. They would survive.

Neil couldn't break them.

Susan finally sat down at the dinner table, sighing with a smile, done serving up the turkey.

"Should we say a blessing or something?" she asked, laughing as she lifted her glass of white wine and took a sip.

Max put her hands together in exaggerated prayer, looking up into the heavens.

"Dear God," she began, dramatic and sarcastic. "Please make sure Neil Hargrove gets coal in his stocking for the rest of his life. Thanks. Amen."

Billy snorted with laughter and Susan accidentally spit out her taste of wine.

"Max!" she scolded, but not too seriously.

"What? We're all thinking it," she said, shrugging.

"Well," Susan said, trying not to weigh in.

"Dear God," Billy began, trying to keep himself from smiling. "Thank you for this food and please keep me smokin' hot for the rest of my life. Amen."

"Oh Jesus," Susan laughed, putting her head in her hand. "I'm raising heathens..."

"You make a blessing, Mom," Max encouraged.

"Well... Alright."

Susan looked at each of them, and slid her palm across the table, taking her daughter's hand. Then, she took Billy's hand.

"Thank you for both of my brave children," she said hesitantly. She licked her lips, taking a deep breath. A silence lapsed over the table as she looked at each of them in turn. It looked as though she had so

many things that she wanted to say she didn't know where to begin. Billy looked down at her hand in his, swallowing. He looked up at Max and she looked at him. Then, she slid a hand forward across the worn faux-wood surface of their dinner table and took his other hand.

"I love them both dearly," Susan continued. "Please bless us and keep us safe. Amen."

"Amen," Billy muttered quietly. He didn't believe in God. What kind of all powerful being let the things Neil did happen and let people suffer? However, he had begun to believe in wishes again, because his wish had begun to come true. Their hands dropped and Billy looked down at his turkey dinner, gravy running sloppily over his mashed potatoes, carrots, and stuffing and felt his throat grow tight. For as long as he could remember, he couldn't recall a Christmas dinner that wasn't tense, a family gathering that wasn't tinged with some kind of undercurrent of fear and loathing.

The light above their heads was warm and bright. Outside, the sky was a deep grey and whispered the beginnings of snow. Max and Susan were laughing, exchanging jokes that he half heard. He watched in amazement, his knife and fork poised beside his delicious dinner, as Susan flicked a carrot at her daughter. Max shrieked in laughter, the unexpected gesture throwing her into a fit of giggles. He smiled wide, looking between them on either side of him, swallowing hard. As Susan and Max's laughter petered out and they began to eat, he bent his head, putting his elbow on the table and holding his forehead in his hand, shielding his face. His eyes pricked in tears he couldn't even try to stop. He had never had a dinner like this, a proper family dinner, one that happened because the people involved actually wanted to spend time with one another and not just to keep up the facade of family togetherness that the outside world wanted from them.

"Billy?" Susan asked, sounding concerned. He felt a hand gently touch his shoulder.

"Are you okay?" Max asked, alarmed.

"Is something wrong?" Susan asked.

Billy let his hand fall to the table, rubbing his lips, looking at them both in turn through the tears in his eyes.

“No,” he said, his voice thick. “Nothing’s wrong. Nothing at all.”

And for the first time in his life, nothing was.

Billy parked the Camaro and walked up the driveway to Steve’s house. He met Sandra and Donnie as they were leaving for their annual Christmas function at the Hawkins Country Club.

“Oh, merry Christmas, Billy!” Sandra greeted jovially, coming up to him with her arms wide and throwing them around him. She gave him a kiss on the cheek and pulled away.

“Merry Christmas, Mrs. Harrington,” he said, smiling at her.

Donnie came up to him and clapped him on the shoulder. “Merry Christmas, buddy,” he said. “Get anything good this year?”

“Yeah, some crazy bastard gave me a job, I dunno what that’s about...,” Billy grinned at him.

Donnie boomed with laughter. “Go on in, Steve and the girls are already downstairs...”

“Thanks,” Billy said. “Have fun.”

“Oh, we will!” Sandra called, getting into the car. He waved them off and went into the house. The sound of laughter greeted him as he closed the door behind him and hung his coat in the closet, kicking off his boots. He went down the carpeted stairs to the basement where Nancy, Robin, and Steve were sitting on the couch. On the coffee table were a few beer cans.

“There he is!” Steve greeted, turning his head and smiling at him. Billy looked at him and his heart was full. God, he fucking loved him... He was paying so little attention he almost didn’t catch the beer Steve chucked his way.

“Hey!” he protested, coming down the last few steps into the room.

“Now it’s gonna fizz over...”

“Merry Christmas Billy!” Robin called, opening her arms, gesturing for him from her place at the end of the couch. He smiled and sat down on the couch beside her, leaning the back of his head on her chest. She wrapped her arms around him affectionately, kissing him on the top of his head.

“Are you drunk already?” he asked her.

“Hah! No, not yet,” she snorted.

Steve, in the middle, grinned and threw himself sideways, laying his head on Billy’s chest, and gestured for Nancy.

“Nooo!” Robin laughed. “You’re gonna crush meeee...”

Nancy threw herself into Steve’s arms and Robin coughed, laughing. “God, you guys are heavy...”

“Yeah, carryin’ around these big nuts is hard work,” Billy said, trying to distract himself from the fact that Steve was so perfectly curled into him by staring out at the fireplace crackling in the wall.

“I’m gonna escape!” Robin crowed, holding her beer and extracting herself with some effort from under Billy. He laughed as she leapt off the couch, his head slamming down on the arm, his chin squashed into his chest.

“Hughhhh,” he giggled, his voice compressed. He took a long slug of his beer, which fizzed over and spilled on Steve.

“Hey!” Steve shouted.

Nancy sat up and took her beer from the table, leaning against the opposite end of the couch and finishing it off. Robin went over to the TV and turned it on, flicking through the channels. Billy was left with Steve laying back on his chest, his heart beating like a drum. He tried to stay as calm as possible, knowing Steve could probably feel… *Everything* against his skin. He sat up a little straighter so he wasn’t totally choking on his beer when he took long, determined sips and Steve sat up too. Terrified that he would take that as a sign he was

uncomfortable with their current situation, Billy reached out with his arm and draped it around Steve's torso. Steve scooched back a bit and settled on his chest again, yawning.

"Ooh!" Robin exclaimed happily. "Muppets Christmas Carol!"

She ran back to the couch and sat between Steve's feet and Nancy, letting him drape his legs over her. Billy drank beer, Nancy getting up and getting them more every time they ran out, until by the end of the movie Billy had a decent buzz on. He felt like he was melting into the couch and Steve was melting into him. He looked over at Nancy as the credits rolled and saw that she was looking at him. He caught her eye and she smiled, grinned even, her eyes sparkling. He blinked slowly, confused, and watched as her eyes flicked down to Steve and then back to him. Then, she looked away, watching as Robin got up to switch the TV off.

He knew Robin would never betray his trust and Nancy was smart. She'd probably figured it out a long time ago. He realized, very suddenly, that Robin and Nancy were in cahoots. Robin had gotten up so it would just be he and Steve, and Nancy was feeding them beer on purpose so they wouldn't have to move. He felt a little embarrassed by this fact, but at the same time... It felt kinda nice to have them acting as his wingmen. For Steve's part, he seemed clueless as to what was going on... But that was okay. Billy was never gonna complain about getting to hold Steve close.

He watched, smiling as Robin handed out gifts to Nancy and Steve. For Nancy she'd gotten a giant stack of cue cards, something that was obviously an inside joke, as Nancy burst out laughing the moment she saw them. She got Steve a cassette he'd been wanting, a replacement for his Pretenders tape that he'd run into the ground. He furrowed his brow but said nothing as Steve, Nancy, and Robin exchanged gifts with each other and nothing came his way. He tried not to feel left out, but a part of him was hurt. As he smouldered in his hurt and confusion, Steve's hand found his fingers where they lay on his chest and gently caressed them once, comfortingly. Billy blinked. Steve was trying to tell him that it would be okay. He felt himself calm down, and eventually, relax.

"Alright, Billy," Robin announced, putting her gifts aside. "You're

probably wondering where the hell your gifts are."

"Yeah, you cheap assholes, what's goin' on?" he demanded playfully, grinning.

Steve finally sat up, and Billy missed the warmth against his body almost immediately. He followed him, sitting upright, still craving to touch him. He let himself lean a little against Steve's arm.

"So, this is from all of us," Robin said, smiling.

She handed him something large and rectangular, wrapped in shiny red wrapping paper, a green ribbon bow garnishing the top. He took it from her. From the feel, it felt like an oversized book. Mystified, he turned it over in his hands.

"Well, open it, dingus," she snorted.

He looked up at her. "You guys didn't get me a book, did you?"

"Yeah, we got you a guide on how to not be a moron," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, that's why it's so big," Billy nodded sagely. Beside him, Steve sputtered and laughed, choking on his beer. Billy smirked down at his gift and opened it, pulling the shiny wrapping off.

It was a photo album.

He blinked and opened it.

The first few pages were covered in shots taken on the day he, Steve, and Robin had gone on a day trip to Indianapolis so long ago. His heart jolted in a strange way, his fingers drifting across a photograph Robin had taken of him sitting in the back of Steve's car, leaning between the seats. His eyes were unfocused, vaguely looking down. He had been in so much pain, then... Physically and emotionally. His eyes drifted across the page and saw a picture of himself, Robin, and Steve wearing sunglasses and staring into a mirror in the middle of Eaton's, the flash of the camera overexposing and almost covering their faces. He stopped, looking up at his friends. Steve had inched closer to him on the couch, leaning his head on his shoulder, looking

at the photographs.

“Is this... Is this an album of all the pictures you guys took last year?” he asked, amazed.

“Yup,” Nancy said, smiling. “We all looked through our photos and put it together for you.”

He let out a breath, looking down at his own face smirking back at him. He blinked long, feeling his eyes burning lightly. He swallowed and closed the album, looking up at Nancy, Robin, and Steve.

“Thanks,” he said, his voice constricted. He thought about the bare walls of the house he shared with Susan and Max, the few photos of Max that were hanging around the living room. There was no trace of him hanging on the walls of that house. He thought about the photo album gathering dust in his closet, holding nothing but pictures of heartache, of better times and scant renditions of his unhappy, sour face. Here before him was a whole new life, collected, printed, and bound. He didn’t have a lot to look back on in his short life, not much worth remembering... But this year, despite its difficulties, despite his pain, despite the drastic and uncomfortable changes... It was worth remembering. It was a chapter he wanted to bookmark forever, a dog eared page in his story.

“I’ll um... I’ll look through it later,” Billy managed. It stayed in his lap the entire rest of the evening, holding onto it like it were something sacred, his fingertips drifting over its plain brown cover, the tale inside familiar and different all at once. He knew if he went through it, from start to finish, he would cry. He didn’t have the same hang ups about shedding tears that he used to and didn’t beat himself up when he started to cry anymore, but still... He couldn’t do it right now.

His friends talked and laughed late into the night, and he laughed and talked with them, lost in their company, drinking a few beer, eating snacks left for them by Steve’s mom. Eventually, it was late, and Nancy and Robin got up to leave. He held them each in turn, putting his head on their shoulders, rubbing their backs. When he pulled away he kissed them on the cheek. He hadn’t realized how much he missed them until they’d come home for Christmas. He

wished that Harley could have been there, but he understood she needed to see her family. They were very close, and her parents loved her very much.

If Robin and Nancy were surprised by his affection, they didn't say anything, only telling him that they loved and missed him. He was still getting used to saying those things out loud, but he hoped his hugs and pecks on the cheeks conveyed what he felt for them. He watched them go from Steve's front door, the sky promising snow, and waved as they got into Nancy's mother's car. He stepped inside as they pulled out of the driveway, and Steve shut the door. The house was quiet and dark, the soft light from the kitchen pouring down into the entranceway, the sound of the distant fire crackling in the grate. Billy was lost in thought, a little buzzed from beer, his body warm and his mind wandering through affectionate places. He blinked and looked at Steve as he felt his hands sliding into his own. His face was soft in the half light, his lips smiling gently.

"Merry Christmas," he said quietly. Then, Steve leaned in and gave him a soft peck on the cheek. He pulled away and Billy felt like a candle that had burned quickly and melted, cooling and rooting him to the floor. He looked into Steve's face, searching his eyes questioningly, amazed.

"Mistletoe," Steve shrugged, his eyes crinkling, a cheeky little grin on his lips. He extracted one of his hands and pointed above the door. Billy's eyes followed his fingertip and saw a sprig of something affixed above the door frame. He narrowed his eyes, snorting.

"That's *holly* , you dumbass," he said, looking back at Steve, grinning.

"Oh," Steve said. He blinked, peering up at it. "Really? Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Holly's got red berries. Mistletoe's got white ones."

"Huh," Steve said. He looked back down at Billy, and something passed between them. He could see Steve's mind working behind his eyes, his brow lowering, his lips parting. Billy's heart leapt into his throat, his veins on fireas he watched him. He let his hand fall from

Steve's grasp, stepping away, terrified.

Steve blinked and it was over.

"I kinda wanna go through that photo album," Billy said randomly, shoving his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He didn't actually want to go through that album right now, but it was the first thing he'd thought of to change the subject. Steve smiled and said okay, but Billy cursed himself silently when he saw there was a little sadness hanging around his face as he turned away and went down the basement steps.

He wished he wasn't such a goddamn coward.

They sat back down on the couch, and Billy felt his beer buzz fading fast. He pulled the photo album toward him, sitting it on his lap, and opened it to the middle, his head full, feeling confused and flush in the face. Steve sat beside him, closer than he needed to be. He looked down at the page he'd opened to and burst out laughing.

A bright flash illuminated three naked bodies as they ran toward a lake. This was Steve, Robin, and himself going skinny dipping late at night at Grandpa Dickie's house the past summer. Steve looked at it and laughed.

"Oh, Jesus...," Billy snorted. He swallowed and closed his eyes.

Maybe he was ready to go through this album.

He flipped to the beginning, where he'd left off, back at the mall in Indianapolis. His hand traced down the photo they'd taken in the photo booth, the three of them squashed in, the last photo a blurry mess as he'd given Steve a wet Willy. He turned the page.

Here was a photograph of Nancy at Halloween, biting the head off of a pumpkin cookie. Here was Billy leaning against the Shelby Cobra… Harley, Robin, Steve, and himself grinning up at the camera. He and Steve covered in pumpkin pie filling...

The seasons in the photos changed. He and Steve were sitting on a curb, waiting for the Christmas parade… Lying down on a playground carousel, snow on their coats, smiling, so close... Him,

smiling beside Steve under a blanket in the Hawkins High football field waiting for fireworks... Hanging out, acting silly... Steve's birthday cake...

He swallowed when he saw his bruised face in the background of a photo Nancy had taken of Robin at Steve's parents' cabin in February... He gathered his nerves and went on. The pictures got warmer, the leaves getting greener. Billy stopped and stared. On the page were two photographs, one of him, smiling softly, sitting in a field of flowers, a little white bloom in his hair. In the second, Steve was sitting beside him. In his head, this photograph had looked a certain way — Steve and him both looking at the camera. What he saw printed before him wasn't what he had pictured.

Instead, Steve was looking at *him* . He was looking at Billy, smiling, his face soft. As the year went on and the pictures continued, he saw, more and more, that if he was near Steve wasn't looking anywhere else. His heart pounded in his chest as he saw the affection on Steve's face as clear as day in every single photo where they were together.

Steve chatted amicably to him as he went through the album, explaining additional context when needed, completely unaware of the fact that Billy's heart was soaring and he wasn't on earth anymore.

Was there a chance?

Did Steve... *Like* him? Did he like him the way he desperately wanted?

The last photo was one taken very recently, of him and Max making goofy faces in front of the Christmas lights they'd stapled to the front of their house.

"I'm glad I took that picture," Steve said, laughing softly. "It's a nice one."

"Thanks for that," Billy managed.

"Of course," Steve said, his voice soft and happy.

Billy closed the album and put it on the coffee table.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get you guys anything,” he apologized, picking at a hole in the knee of his jeans.

Steve put his arm around him, laying his head on his shoulder.

“Don’t be,” he said simply. He kissed Billy once, chastely, on the cheek, and then stood up to get a beer. Billy sat rigid, flushed, and squeezed his eyes shut.

January 16th, 1987

Billy snorted, laughing as Steve’s finger jabbed down on the wrong button. The tape stopped and the music cut out.

“Nooo!” he yelled, annoyed, half-laughing. “That’s not what I wanted... Now there’s gonna be a weird gap...”

He pressed pause on the other tape.

“Just rewind and record over it, dweeb,” Billy replied, yawning. He was lying on his belly on Steve’s bed, a pile of looseleaf in front of him. He was doodling absently, his ankles crossed, drawing an exaggerated set of tits on a poorly drawn woman with heavy makeup.

“Ugh, I’m just gonna rewind the whole thing and do it later,” Steve sighed.

He got up from the floor where he’d been sitting in front of his tape deck, surrounded by a few rickety towers of cassettes, carefully stepping over them and crawling onto the bed.

“Whatcha drawing?” Steve asked, lying down beside Billy, flipping on his belly, looking down at the loose leaf.

“Tits,” Billy said.

“Nice,” Steve replied, reaching a hand down to the floor to pick up a beer can he’d left sitting precariously on the carpet. He took a sip.

Billy added some big hair to the lady, then some hips and thin

underwear. As he coloured in her hair, Steve gestured for the pen.

“Gimme that for a sec,” he said, smiling. Billy gave it to him and watched, a smile lighting his face, as Steve wrote something in the blank header space at the top of the page.

STEVE AND BILLY’S

“DICKIN’ AROUND HAWKINS” TUNES

Billy plucked the pen out of Steve’s fingers and aggressively drew over the letter S at the end of the words *Billy’s* and *Tunes* , covering them with a large Z. Steve laughed, taking the pen back, writing a number one in the margins. He looked down at the paper, tapping the pen on his lips thoughtfully.

“What song’s first?” he asked Billy.

“Gotta be Judas Priest first,” Billy said. “ *You Got Another Thing Comin’* by Judas Priest.”

“I was gonna put *Cruel Summer* by Bananarama first, but—“

“Bananarama?” Billy demanded, laughing.

“Yeah, you know— *‘It’s a cruel, cruel, cruel summer...”*

“Yeah, I know the song, dude, but... This is gonna be a fuckin’ weird tape if you want Bananarama and I want Judas Priest.”

“Whatever,” Steve said, grinning, writing in Judas Priest and Bananarama in the first two lines.

Billy smiled at the two songs and shook his head. This right there was the fundamental difference between him and Steve, written in Steve’s relatively neat handwriting in capital letters. He’d made mix tapes with other people when he was younger, but... He’d definitely never made a tape with someone who liked Duran Duran as much as Steve did.

“Okay, good start,” Steve chuckled.

“Hmm... What’s that whiny song Robin’s always singing’ at us?” Billy asked.

“Which one? They’re all whiny...” Steve snorted.

“Yeah, yeah, but the one she sings when she’s teasin’ us.” Billy put on a bad British accent. “You know, *‘Booys doooon’t cryyyyy...’”*

“Oh, yeah! The Cure!”

“The Cure!” Billy repeated, taking back the pen and writing it on the list under Bananarama.

“Wow,” Steve laughed, leaning his arm against Billy’s. “This is already a shit show...”

Steve sat back and grabbed a pen from his desk, making the mattress bounce. Billy held onto the stack of looseleaf, holding the pen in between his fingers, his mind fluttering on the edge of something suggestive as the springs creaked. He bit his lip once, looking away, and adjusted himself. He didn’t know if Steve would ever look at him in that way, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t gonna try and make sure his ass looked good in the sweatpants he was wearing. If there was a snowball's chance in hell that Steve actually liked him back that way and wasn’t just an overly friendly kinda guy... Billy was definitely not opposed to taking that chance.

He wanted to think that Steve might have lingered sitting back on his haunches a little longer than he needed to, before he flopped back down on his belly, shoulder to shoulder with him.

“I’m putting The Cars on here,” Steve announced, writing out *You Might Think* in the line under The Cure.

Billy watched him and absentmindedly doodled lower on the page as Steve spit balled suggestions that he hummed or hawed over. He was trying to be present, trying to be there, but all he could think about was how happy he was, how he was having fun, how he was relaxed. He felt like an outsider looking in, like he was floating above his body.

“Why’re you drawing a heart?” Steve asked, his voice filtering up into

the clouds where his brain was currently floating.

“Whuh?” he said smartly, blinking and looking at Steve, who was smiling teasingly at him. Billy looked down at the pen in his left hand and saw that it was paused over a heart he hadn’t fully realized he’d been drawing.

“Oh,” he said, snorting, playing it off. “I dunno.”

He fought back the flames that wanted to rise to his cheeks. How fucking embarrassing... What kinda teen girl bullshit was this? Even Max didn’t do this kinda stuff. In fact, she’d probably make fun of him for it if she ever caught him drawing hearts with his head in his hand and his feet crossed in the air like he was spilling his heart out to a diary. He furrowed his brow at the heart and gave it a face, making X’s for eyes and a tongue that stuck out. Steve chuckled and leaned over, drawing an arrow on either side of the heart, curving little blood droplets from the tip of the arrow with the pen.

“Your heart is *dead* ,” Steve said, affecting a low, dramatic voice as his hand pulled away. Billy looked down at the stupid drawing and knew that the exact opposite was true.

“Oh, what about that song Harley played that one time?” Steve continued.

“What song?” Billy asked, distracted. The pen felt almost alien in his hand. It had been a very long time since he’d written anything. The first few days that he could see well enough to look at paper he’d spent doodling. He’d always liked to draw but his Dad had never gotten him anything to draw with and said it was a waste of time. He knew he wasn’t good at drawing like Will Byers was, but he couldn’t help but wonder if he’d have been any good if he’d been encouraged.

“Ugh, I have the melody in my head but I can’t think of it... It had zombies in it?”

“ *Zombie Dance* by The Cramps,” Billy said, knowing what song it was immediately. That had been a staple song in the years when he’d hang out in Harley’s room in L.A. and they’d pretend they were gonna be a famous rock n’ roll duo someday.

“Right!” Steve said, writing it down.

They spent the next half hour bouncing songs off one another, each suggestion wildly different from the next. As they brainstormed, Billy drew a stupid little figure of himself, wearing his swim trunks, making himself look more muscular than he actually was. Steve watched him draw, laughing, leaning over to draw a pair of dark sunglasses over his eyes.

“Draw me!” Steve encouraged, grinning.

Billy leaned his head down, sliding his glasses further up his nose, and drew Steve, equally more muscular than he actually was and in his swim trunks. Steve added sunglasses to himself too. Billy paused above his rendition of himself on the page, the tip of the pen floating above the unblemished chest of his self portrait. Then he blinked long, and scratched a few messy lines on his torso, colouring them in. He felt Steve watching him as he drew his scars, and when he looked at him there was a little smile on his face, his head laying on his crossed arms. After a moment, Steve lifted his head and wrote something in the space between their cartoonish selves.

“2 TUFF GUYS” he wrote, underlining and bolding the text. Billy laughed. He drew a sun just below, to which Steve immediately added sunglasses.

“How come everything gets sunglasses?” Billy demanded, nudging him, amused.

“Uh, ‘cause that’s how you know they’re *cool* ,” Steve said sarcastically, rolling his eyes. “Duh!”

“I see,” Billy said.

Steve yawned, finishing his beer and putting the empty can back onto the carpet. Billy, propped up on his elbows, fished out his smokes from the front pocket of his shirt and pulled one out. He twisted his body, popping the cigarette in his mouth and leaned back to grab the ashtray from Steve’s side table, bringing it in front of him on the bed. He lit it and took a deep drag, looking down at their list thoughtfully.

“Oh, we should put *Ophelia* on here, by The Band,” Billy said, tapping the sheet with the back of his pen. “Reminds me of Grandpa Dickie. How’s that old bastard doin,’ by the way?”

“Oh, he’s good,” Steve said, writing down the song. “He hates the winter but he’s too stubborn to move into town. I might go see him soon, maybe for a weekend, plough him out and make sure he’s got enough firewood, that kinda thing. You wanna come?”

“Yeah, if Doug’ll spare me,” Billy shrugged, smiling, tapping his cigarette into the ashtray. He’d love to visit Grandpa Dickie again.

Billy lifted his head, smoking, looking around Steve‘s room. He liked being here. It felt safe and comfortable. His own room in the house he shared with Max and Susan felt sort of like just a place where his stuff lived. It had become far more comfortable since his Dad had moved out, of course, but it wasn’t exactly cozy. Not the way Steve’s room was, anyways. Steve had told him this was the room he’d been occupying since he was born, as his family had never moved. Back in L.A., Billy had moved a couple of times— from apartment to apartment, then to a small house in the suburbs. He’d never been attached to his homes, because they’d never really been good homes to begin with. This was Steve’s childhood bedroom, the one he’d known all his life. Billy’s eyes wandered over to the corner closet and furrowed his brow, seeing something startlingly familiar just inside the white sliding door that he’d left ajar.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing at it.

“What’s what?” Steve asked, writing something down, not looking.

“That thing in your closet,” Billy said, staring at it, a bemused smile on his face. He slid off the bed and stood upright, going over to it.

“Wait,” he said, peering in. “That’s not what I think it is...”

He reached in and pulled it out.

“ *Really,* Steve? You just keep this around?” Billy laughed, amazed, his cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth. He brandished the infamous baseball bat driven through with nails that Max had

used to threaten his balls with so long ago as Steve looked up, blinking.

“Of course,” he said brightly, smiling. “What kinda dumbass doesn’t carry around a spiked bat?”

Billy laughed and handed it to Steve, who took it, standing up. Billy watched in secret admiration as Steve flipped the baseball bat, twirling it expertly. Billy’s eyebrows raised and he blew out smoke through his nostrils. Steve was a pretty mellow guy, most of the time, and had been maybe gentler than usual with him over the last year. It was easy to forget that Steve had once been kind of a dick and a little scrappy, and could, when pressed, actually fight. Steve had been sweet to him most of the time, but if he was truthful with himself, this shithead side kinda turned him on. All that kindness was good and all, and had its place... But so did the cocky grin Steve was giving him as he considered the spiked bat in his hands.

“I looked like such a bad ass taking down Demodogs with this thing,” Steve said, grinning. “You’re lucky I didn’t try and take *you* down with it too.”

“Max did,” Billy snorted, staring, pulling the cigarette from his lips and ashing it, never taking his eyes off of the delicious sight of Steve picking something from one of the spikes absently.

“What d’you mean?” Steve asked.

“She stabbed me with that drug you guys were givin’ Will and then smashed that thing between my legs and told me to leave you guys alone,” Billy explained, shrugging, giving Steve a grin.

Steve shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut and laughing.

“Oh, see, here I was thinking you left us all alone ‘cause you felt bad... Really, it was just your balls at stake.”

“Pretty much,” Billy said, crawling back onto the bed and taking his abandoned pen, looking up at Steve. The view was better from here, anyway. He stared openly as Steve walked back to the closet, putting the bat away. His jeans fit him *real* nice.

He flicked his eyes down to the paper as Steve turned around, and started doodling. He drew the vague shape of a monster, and then a spiked bat brutalizing it. Steve lay down beside him and laughed. On the other side of the page, Steve doodled a pretty good rendition of his skull tattoo.

“Still think my tattoo’s dumb?” Billy asked him, smirking, looking at Steve mischievously.

“Hmm... Nah,” Steve said, looking back at him, smiling softly, his brown eyes glinting. “It’s kinda grown on me.”

Billy’s heart leapt out of his chest and he looked away, feeling warm. He stared blankly down at the drawing of the monster and the spiked bat, feeling like he’d been here before, having the strangest sensation that he’d been right here his entire life. He fantasized for a moment about Steve saving him from the creature that had pulled him down into the darkness and done things to him that he still couldn’t remember. He fantasized for a moment that he had gone to the mall instead of making an ill-fated meeting with Mrs. Wheeler, had found Steve Harrington in his stupid little sailor uniform and fallen in love with him sooner. The jagged lines he’d drawn to show the monster were vague and misshapen, and he stared at them, seeing the disgusting, sinewy flesh... Seeing the teeth, the movement, the shadows... He heard whispering, alien flesh creeping along the ground...

Then, he was looking into Steve’s face, so close to his own. He was lying on his back. Steve’s hands were on either side of his face, his brown eyes bright and concerned, his eyebrows furrowed, his pink lips parted.

“Billy?”

“I— Sorry,” Billy muttered, confused, disoriented.

“You kinda went rigid and couldn’t hear me,” Steve said, licking his lips. “Then you kinda went limp, so I rolled you over, and then you... You woke up...”

“Sorry,” Billy muttered again, closing his eyes. He felt ashamed. He

knew what had happened. He thought he was done with seeing things that weren't there, reliving what he'd gone through...

"You saw the creature again, right?"

"Not really," Billy said, his mouth dry, his heart was slowing down. "I just kinda... Heard things... Could see things in my mind's eye... And I guess I must've conked out..."

He opened his eyes and Steve didn't look afraid, like he had in the past, just concerned.

"I sort of... Have those in my dreams sometimes," Steve admitted, looking to the side, away from Billy, his lips twisting. "I mean... Sometimes I see stuff too... I just... I dunno. I never wanted to scare anybody..."

"So I'm not the only crazy person around here, huh?" Billy said softly, unable to stop himself from smiling a tiny smile. Steve let out a breath of laughter, his face still hovering over his own.

"No," Steve said. His hands moved from the sides of Billy's face. He tucked a strand of hair behind Billy's ear slowly, looking down at him from above. Billy caught the hand in his hair gently and held it to his cheek. He closed his eyes, overwhelmed with how Steve was looking at him. Then Steve pulled away, gently, and Billy opened his eyes. He watched as Steve took the loose leaf and a pen and wrote something, holding it. He turned it around, showing him.

Near the drawing of the monster and the spiked bat, Steve had written the words ***"MONSTER KILLERS."*** Or, rather, ***"MONTER"*** killers, since he'd forgotten the letter 'S' in the word Monster.

"Hey, dumbass, you're missing a letter there," Billy snorted, lifting a hand and poking at the page.

"What?" Steve demanded, flipping the page around. "Oh, goddammit..."

He furiously scribbled a tiny 'S' where it was supposed to go.

"There," he said, turning it back around.

“Why’s it say Monster *Killers* ? It should say just Monster *Killer* ,” Billy asked quietly. “ *You’re* the one who kills monsters.”

Steve gave him a confused look.

“You’re a monster killer too,” Steve said softly, his hands lowering, still holding the paper.

Billy knew he was talking about a lot more than Demodogs and Mind Flayers.

He looked at Steve like he’d never looked at him before, his entire body filled with something deeper than a crush, deeper than love even. The feeling didn’t even have a name, but it was beautiful and made him feel like he was made of light, bursting with energy, his mind clear as a bell. He sat up and took Steve’s head in his hands and brought his lips to Steve’s forehead and held them there, closing his eyes. After a few moments, he pulled away, leaning his chin over Steve’s shoulder, sliding his hands down from his face and curling them behind his back, splaying his palms across the smooth fabric of his t-shirt. Steve’s chin came to rest on Billy’s shoulder, his hands wrapped around him, his fingers clutching his shoulder blades.

They didn’t speak for several moments. Then, Billy felt Steve’s jaw open against his shoulder.

“I need to tell you something,” Steve said.

Billy’s stomach flipped.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. But... You gotta keep holding me, okay? I’m fuckin’ terrified. Please don’t let go,” Steve said, his voice cracking.

“Okay,” Billy whispered.

“Maybe you’ll wanna... Get the hell away from me when I say this, and... If you do, I’ll... I’ll understand... I promise I won’t be mad...”

Billy squeezed his eyes shut, clutching Steve, clenching his jaw in agony.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately, and... I kinda realized something about myself.”

Steve paused, and Billy felt frozen in place, unable to move.

“I realized that... I like *guys* . Y’know... The way I like girls...”

Billy could feel Steve’s heart fluttering wildly in his rib cage, pressed so tightly to his own heart. His lips parted, his mind blank, feeling almost numb. All his aching... All this time...

“I know that guys liking guys is... Well, it’s... You know,” Steve continued, sounding choked. “So... If you’re grossed out, or like... Uncomfortable being my friend, I get it. I won’t be mad if you don’t wanna hang out anymore...”

“N-No!” Billy barked out, like a wounded animal, feeling relief, amazement, and strangely, grief. “I mean... I...”

He wanted to tell him that he liked guys too. He wanted to tell him that he was in love, that he woke up every morning thinking about Steve and went to bed and dreamed about him every night. But his words wouldn’t leave his mouth. He held Steve closer, squeezing him, burying his head into his neck. He could feel Steve’s wet eyes against his shirt.

I love you.

“Shit man,” he sniffed instead, giving a watery laugh, trying to sound like he was gently teasing when all he wanted to do was kiss him. “I wouldn’t stop lovin’ you ‘cause of somethin’ like that.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. The word love had slipped in there so casually, so effortlessly, but it wasn’t the way he wanted to say it, and it wasn’t the way Steve would take it. Steve laughed, his voice thick.

“God,” he gulped. Billy could feel him trembling gently in his arms. “I was so fucking scared...”

“I know,” Billy said quietly.

He knew more than anything.

As they pulled away, laughing, embarrassed, giving each other gentle punches on the arm, Billy felt hollow. He absentmindedly changed the S in Monster Killers to a Z, and surreptitiously wiped his eyes when Steve got up to turn on the TV.

January 31st, 1987

Steve gave his hair another spritz of Farrah and sighed at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. The day outside was bright and sunny, reflecting off of the crisp snow on the ground. He looked out the window and stared at his car sitting in the driveway, waiting for him. He felt his stomach turn in knots and looked away from it.

In an hour, he was picking up Billy.

His mind jumped around maniacally as he left the bathroom, excitement and dread dancing like an electric shock through his nerves. He went into his bedroom and looked at the two shirts he'd picked out. Blue or white?

He looked at them and picked them both up in a fit of frustration, throwing them to the floor, putting his hands on his hips. It didn't matter anyway— They were gonna be in the car and he was gonna be wearing his coat. He let out a distressed groan and sat down on the bed, holding his chin in his hands. He'd seen teen girls do this in romantic comedies when they were in love, and he wondered if this forlorn pose had any magic in it that would make him feel like he knew what he was doing.

Billy had accepted him for who he was, which had been an unimaginable weight off his chest— But there was a second part to his confessions that he hadn't been brave enough to tell.

He remembered being in love with Nancy... And this was a lot like that, only there was something else, something different that he couldn't put his finger on. He tried for a few minutes to think of what it was, but couldn't. He needed Robin.

He laid back down on his bed and grabbed the phone, putting it on his chest and picking it up, dialling the phone in her dorm room.

It rang several times before Harley finally answered.

“Hullo?”

“Hey, Harley. it’s Steve,” he said, swallowing. “Is Robin there?”

“Oh, hi Steve! Yup, just one sec...”

He waited for a few moments in the crackling silence of the phone line, feeling like his heart was going to explode out of his chest. He already felt sweaty even though he’d just showered and he nervously wiped his free hand on his sweatpants.

“Hey!” Robin greeted. “What’s up?”

“Oh, just... Going to get Billy in an hour and losing my mind ‘cause I’m probably gonna tell him I love him or something...”

“Oh no,” Robin said, snorting softly. “Okay. You can do this.”

“I can do this,” he repeated back to her.

“You’re cute and Billy likes you too much to be mean to you even if he doesn’t feel the same way, right?”

“Right,” Steve said, licking his lips.

“I promise it’ll be okay,” she said encouragingly, her voice softer than usual. “Okay?”

“Okay,” he said weakly.

“Listen. We were just about to head out, but... You’re a great guy, Steve. You’re kind and you’re sweet. And Billy really cares about you. It’ll be okay. Whatever happens.”

“Thanks,” he said, closing his eyes. “Thanks, Robin.”

“You got this,” she said encouragingly.

“I got this,” he said, smiling a little. “Love you, Robin. Tell Harley I love her too.”

“I will,” she said. “Good luck, Steve.”

“Thanks,” he whispered. “Talk to you later…”

“Okay. Bye.”

He hung up the phone, feeling moderately more confident than he had before. He held the phone and cradle on his chest, staring up into the ceiling unseeingly. He jumped when someone suddenly knocked on his door.

“Yeah?” he called.

“It’s me!” his Mom called back. “Can I come in?”

“Yeah,” he called to her.

His door opened. Sandra came into the room, peering around the wall. She was wearing a simple blue dress, her blonde hair curled onto the top of her head. A couple of bangles jingled at her wrists as she leaned against the wall and crossed her arms, looking at him. Her lips were turned in a little smile, her eyes soft. The brown tint of her brows raised upward in what looked like sympathy. He stared at her, not sure what to make of this expression.

“Steven,” his Mom began. She stopped and twisted her lips, then came over to his bed, sitting down on it and looking at him. She lifted one of her hands and ran her manicured fingers once through his hair.

“What’s up?” he asked her. She was acting really weird…

Her hand retreated and she curled her fingers in her lap, looking down at them.

“Is there… Is there something going on between you and Billy?” she asked tentatively, as if unsure how to phrase the question.

“Like, how?” Steve asked guardedly, unable to stop himself from

sounding defensive.

“Oh, nothing... I don’t know. It’s silly,” she laughed, standing up. “Forget I said anything...”

She turned and went to walk away. Steve bit his lip and flung himself upright, sitting forward. He was suddenly very desperate for someone who wasn’t his friend to know, someone older than him.

“I— I *want* there to be,” he said, in a rush. Sandra stopped in his doorway and turned around, staring at him in surprise.

“Pardon?”

“I said... I want there to be... Something going on... Between me and...”

Steve couldn’t finish his sentence. His cheeks burned. He quickly looked down, unable to meet his Mom’s eyes. He heard the creak of the floorboards beneath the green carpet as she walked back into the room and sat down beside him on the bed.

“Steven?” she prompted, her voice quiet.

“I... I like... I like *guys* , Mom,” he said, tearing up, his throat constricted. “I... I like girls too, but... God... I’m in love... I’m in love with... With Billy...”

His Mom put a hand on his knee. “I know, sweetheart,” she said softly.

Steve sniffed loudly, trying to stop himself from crying. He felt like that’s all he did lately, was tell people his shocking secrets and cry. He hoped this wasn’t a trend... He’d like his adult life to be filled with maybe a little more calm and casual days. But he couldn’t help it. Now that he knew this about himself, it was like a compulsion to tell people. He wanted everyone to know, even though it wasn’t practical or safe. He *needed* people to know. He felt like he wasn’t whole if the people he knew and loved didn’t know.

His Mom’s words caught up with him and he short circuited for a moment.

“Wh—What?”

“I… I always knew you were a little… Different,” his Mom said. “You…”

She let out a little laugh and looked at him.

“When you were a little boy, maybe four or five… We used to hang around with another family at the cottage, do you remember them? They had a little boy your age, his name was Jeremy?”

“Oh yeah,” Steve said. “Shit, I remember him.”

“Yes. They ended up moving to Ohio, but… When you used to play with Jeremy, you… Well. You used to tell me that you thought he was very handsome, and you used to blush when he’d talk to you, and one day you even… Told me you’d like to kiss him.”

Steve stared at his Mom in awe. “I don’t remember any of this…”

“I… I’m glad,” she said, sniffing. “Because when you said that you wanted to kiss Jeremy, I was afraid… I got mad at you, I said you shouldn’t say those things… So you never did, ever again.”

Steve stared down at his hands. He genuinely didn’t remember any of this, but clearly his mother’s anger had made some kind of impression on him. Her fear had made him fearful, and so he had chosen not to until he had forgotten about his crush on Jeremy entirely. He shuffled sideways and sat beside her on the edge of the bed.

“I’m sorry,” she said, quietly.

“You were scared of me being different,” Steve said. He put his head on her shoulder. She sighed heavily.

“What made you change your mind?” he asked her.

“The way you look at Billy,” his Mom said simply.

Steve put his arm around his Mom’s waist, hugging her.

“I’m gonna tell him today,” he said softly.

She kissed him on the forehead.

“Good luck,” Sandra said, smiling that demure little smile.

“HERE I AAAAMMM,” Billy roared, bouncing around his bedroom. *“ROCK YOU LIKE A HURRICAAAANE!”*

He threw on a shirt, red, the one he’d worn when he’d beat Steve to a pulp. He bent down and checked himself in the mirror, curling a blonde lock over his forehead. He smirked and winked at himself. Lookin’ good. He noticed a tiny little blood stain on the collar of the shirt, barely noticeable against the colour of the fabric, and stood straight, laughing. He made a mental note to show it to Steve later. He’d think it was hilarious. He tucked the shirt into his jeans, new ones, a pair Susan had come home with the other day. They were stiff, but he kinda liked them that way. He turned and checked his ass and whistled quietly, admiring himself. He hadn’t had new jeans in a decent amount of time, and these ones grabbed him in a way he really liked. He threaded a belt around his waist and did it up tight. He stepped back and regarded himself. His shirt was buttoned almost all the way to the top, only the first few buttons undone. He bit his lip, unsure for a moment, then looked down, unbuttoning it all the way to his belly button. The scars on his chest winked out like a tantalizing secret from behind the fabric of his shirt, the small gold medallion hanging around his neck sitting on them proudly. He stared at himself.

The last few days he’d felt like he’d woken up from a very long, long nap. He felt more like himself than he’d felt in his entire life. He looked up to the corner of the long mirror and smiled wide, feeling his heart glow.

He’d hung the picture Steve had taken last May in the corner of his mirror, the one of them sitting together in a field of small white flowers. He looked happy, like he was laughing at something Steve was saying, and Steve was looking at him, a delighted smile on his face, his brown eyes looking at nothing but him. Nobody had ever looked at him like that in his entire life, with so much affection, so

much love. His heart swelled even more as he plucked it from the corner of the mirror where he'd tucked it into the black frame. He wandered over to his bed and sat down, grabbing his glasses and putting them on, holding the picture close to his face, taking in every detail. He shook his head, sighing softly, and put it back in its place on the corner of his mirror. He paused for a moment then kissed his fingers, putting them to his lips and placing them softly on Steve's face. He finally looked away, grabbing a jacket from his closet and flipping his hair over the collar, opening his bedroom door and striding out into the hall. He went into the kitchen and sat on a chair, pulling his boots toward them. Susan appeared at the kitchen doorway, holding a stack of papers and looking pale. He stopped what he was doing and looked at her, concerned.

"What's up?" he asked immediately.

She came into the room and walked slowly toward the kitchen table, sitting down heavily in one of the chairs and throwing the stack of papers onto the scuffed wooden surface. She leaned heavily on her hand, her eyes squeezing shut, shaking her head.

Billy straightened up and grimaced. "We're losin' the house," he deduced flatly.

Susan let out a sad laugh. "Yes." She licked her lips and opened her eyes, looking sadly at him. "I found out yesterday. I just... I don't know how to tell Max. This is the only house she's ever known in this town, and... I don't know..."

Billy looked around the kitchen, snorting softly. "Honestly, Susan? This isn't exactly a house of good memories... She'll probably be okay."

"But... It *started* to be one," Susan said quietly, distressed. "It started to become... A happy place. You know?"

He turned his head and looked at her, blinking.

"I just feel... I just feel like I failed you both," she said, swallowing, her voice constricted. "I know it's silly..."

Billy looked down at his hands. On his middle finger was a ring his father had on the bathroom counter, taken off sometime and never put back on. He'd found it, later, after he'd regained his sight, and had been strangely fascinated with it. He'd decided to wear it always. It was a reminder, a pledge to himself to do better than his father had done. He spun it, words jumbling through his head, feelings and sentiments he knew were right and good vying for his attention. He was silent for several moments, putting what he needed to say to Susan in line. He turned his head and thought of himself grinning in a field of flowers beside someone who might love him and licked his lips.

"S'not the house that's happy," he said. Susan looked at him, confused.

"I mean... This house? It's just a house. It's not what's makin' this place a good place to live, y'know?"

He looked at her. His fingers twitched hesitantly for a moment. Then he moved his chair closer, putting his arms around her shoulders, pulling her into his side, her curly permed hair tickling his nose as he turned his head. She let out an incredulous breath of laughter and wrapped her arms around him.

"You're so much older now," she said, after a few moments. "So much more mature..."

"I wouldn't go that far," he snorted, laughing.

She pulled away, looking at him, smiling. She tucked a stray piece of his hair behind his ear. "I'm proud of you."

He looked down and searched his feelings. He realized he felt the same way.

"I'm proud of you too," he said sincerely, his lips quivering with a smile.

Susan tilted her head, raising her eyebrows, her eyes shining.

"Thank you," she said. She looked around the room thoughtfully. "I really thought your father was a good person when I met him, you

know? He was good to me... But he wasn't good to you. I should have known... By the time I saw him treating you bad, I was already married..."

"He can be nice when he wants to be," Billy said. He thought about himself, the times he thought he was doing what he thought was good in a very bad way; threatening Max to stay away from Lucas, breaking her skateboard, kicking Steve's ass... There had been a grain of love there, of some higher intention to protect... But he'd come to know that protecting someone with cruelty wasn't love at all.

"Are you and Steve hanging out today?" she asked, sniffing, changing the subject.

"Yeah."

Susan licked her lips and tilted her head. "I saw that picture on your mirror the other day… It's really nice."

Billy felt frozen to the chair, looking at her, feeling like she'd seen the feelings he had for Steve plain as day, like he'd said them out loud.

"Yeah," he said, casually, shrugging. "He took it last May, on Max's birthday."

"Last May?"

"Yeah."

Her mouth opened but she didn't speak. A lot of things went unsaid between them as they looked at one another. Billy licked his lips.

"He makes you so happy," Susan said, at last. It was a statement, a fact. He didn't have to explain anything to her.

"Yeah," Billy said. "He does."

He smiled, and she smiled back.

Steve took the steps up to the kitchen door at the back of Billy's house two at a time, and was just about to knock when the door

opened. He jumped back a little, startled. Billy looked out at him and grinned.

“Hey,” he greeted, coming outside onto the front step and zipping up his jacket against the January chill. It was a sunny day, but the wind was bitter and blew across the flat, barren fields and stung exposed skin.

“Hey!” Steve greeted. All the nervous energy that had been jolting around his body all morning seemed to freeze and fizzle. He looked into Billy’s face, feeling oddly relieved. He thought he’d feel even more nervous now that Billy was right in front of him, but there was something so calming about the look in Billy’s eyes that he felt better just by being near him. “You wanna get goin’?”

“Yeah, let’s get outta this wind...”

They went down the step and at the bottom Steve instinctively looped his arm through Billy’s then blinked, looking at him. Billy’s eyebrows raised and he laughed.

“Whoops,” Steve said, snorting. “Habit.” They walked arm in arm across the street to Steve’s car and then let go, Steve getting in the driver’s side and Billy in the passenger’s side. As he started the engine, Billy lit a cigarette.

“You know, I thought I’d see you more now that we pretty much work together, but I feel like I haven’t seen you all week,” Steve chuckled.

“Yeah, that’s ‘cause I’m where the real work gets done,” Billy grinned at him. “Not like you pansies over in sales.”

“Y’know, sometimes I think my Dad was wrong— *You* should be in sales and I should be working on the cars,” Steve chortled. “Most of our customers are over the age of forty, and I know that’s your type, so...”

Billy slapped the dashboard, laughing.

“Cars’d be flyin’ out the fuckin’ door,” he said.

“Seriously…”

Steve stopped at a red light and turned to Billy, looking him over. He looked very handsome today, and somehow he seemed calmer than he usually had been, like something had shifted and he’d levelled out. He was wearing his glasses, smoking quietly, his eyes soft and content.

“Steve, I know I’m lookin’ hot today, but the light just turned,” Billy said, without looking at him, tapping his cigarette in the ashtray.

“Oh.” Steve quickly turned his head and put his foot on the gas. “Sorry. I’m kinda spacey today…”

“You’re always spacey,” Billy smiled.

“Yeah…”

Steve swallowed. His nerves came rushing back in a torrent. His mind protested anxiously that he didn’t actually have to tell Billy about how he felt… He didn’t actually have to do anything… But another part of him felt like if he didn’t, he would combust. It had become almost impossible to hide, and surely, hopefully, Billy had started to notice… Hopefully.

“So, I been looking at houses,” he said casually, swallowing down his nerves.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I got my eye on a couple. Wanna go see em’?”

“Sure.”

Steve turned toward the suburbs, his fingers drumming on the steering wheel.

“We’re gonna be lookin’ for a place soon, too,” Billy yawned, crushing his cigarette in the ashtray.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. My Dad got the house,” Billy sighed. “Susan was all broken up about it. But... I mean, I told her, it isn’t like that house has a lot of good memories, you know? I’m thinkin’ we could get somethin’ closer to the school, an apartment or whatever. Somethin’ smaller, maybe.”

“Yeah,” Steve said encouragingly. “What a fuckin’ dick, though... Why doesn’t he just go back to California?”

“Who knows,” Billy said, shaking his head. “I never really got him before and I’m not about to get him now...”

“That pisses me off, y’know? Jesus Christ,” Steve grumbled. “He doesn’t need it! It’s a three bedroom house, what the fuck’s he gonna do with it?”

“I dunno, and to be honest, I don’t really give a shit... We’ll be fine without it.”

Steve could hear Billy’s anger simmering at the surface of his words, but he could tell that he’d long ago made peace with the fact that his Dad would try anything to fuck them over, and if this was his method of choice, it ultimately wasn’t the worst thing he could’ve done to them. Steve shook his head and forced himself not to bite his lip anxiously. A hundred very stupid thoughts fluttered like a swarm of bees in his head and he tried to tamp them down. He turned onto a side street and pulled up alongside a For Sale sign in the front yard of a mid-70s modern house and parked. This house was the more expensive of the two he’d been looking at. He peered at it.

“Here we are,” he said. Billy looked out at it.

Steve’s heart thumped in his chest as a foolish plan formed in his mind. He squeezed his eyes shut. *Shut up, Harrington…*

“It’s got two garages, so that’s cool...” he said.

“Yeah. That’s cool. You work on cars and stuff.”

“Yeah, you know... You don’t want Adrian getting salt on her every winter... You could store her in there...”

You could live there too… No no no no, Harrington. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up…

Steve felt like he couldn't stop himself. The idea had formed in his head and now it wouldn't let go.

"Yeah. That'd be cool," Billy said, sounding a little uninterested.

Steve paused.

"Do you... Like it?" he asked.

Billy shrugged. "Yeah, it's alright."

"You... Don't like it," Steve deduced, turning to him, his hand on the steering wheel, looking into his face in well-concealed panic. He didn't like it... But that didn't matter because his idea was stupid and he shouldn't worry about it anyways! *Don't do it, Harrington…*

"I— I mean it's not my house, so it don't matter," Billy snorted, leaning against the side of the door and smiling, bemused.

"What don't you like about it?" Steve demanded, laughing, leaning over Billy's lap and staring out the passenger side window at the house. Billy turned his head and looked at it, gesturing vaguely.

"It's... I dunno, man, it's kinda ugly. Flat roof... The windows are kinda weird," Billy shrugged, snorting.

"The windows *are* really weird," Steve agreed with him, nodding, raising his eyebrows. He stopped, squeezing his eyes shut and shaking his head as if to clear it. "But— I didn't think you'd care what it looked like," he laughed. He wanted to hit himself. *Stop talking, stop talking, stop talking...*

"Like I said... What does me not liking it gotta do with anything?" Billy asked, giving Steve a funny look. Steve leaned back in his seat, his eyebrows raised to his forehead, scratching his cheek absently.

"Well, there's another house I was looking at— It's got a normal triangle roof and *not* weird windows," he said, flicking his hand out in an offering sort of way.

“Oh.... Kay?” Billy said, his eyebrows furrowed.

“Yeah, you know,” Steve ploughed on, feeling like he was going to throw up. “It’s also bigger...”

He looked down. *Fuck it. Here it was, his stupid idea...*

“It’s got... Y’know... Two extra rooms...” he mumbled, his cheeks flushing, picking at his jeans.

Billy leaned his head forward slightly, a mystified expression on his face. He stared at Steve, baffled, for many moments.

Steve squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head, wincing. “I’m—“

He gestured emphatically with his hands.

“Do you want to move in with me?”

“Wh— what?”

“I said... Do you wanna move in with me?” Steve repeated, a heavy lump in his throat.

Caught off guard, Billy blinked several times.

“Uh...,” he said, his eyebrows furrowing. “I mean... Yeah, but what about Susan an’ Max? I can’t leave them, we can barely pay bills as it is...”

Steve swallowed the lump in his throat and looked away, staring at the ceiling. *Back out now, Harrington... Back out now...*

“That’s why the other house... The one with the normal roof and normal windows... Has two extra rooms. One for Max, and one for Susan... Y’know?”

Steve closed his eyes, his cheeks burning, almost wincing in pain. *You fucking idiot* , he thought gloomily to himself. He opened his eyes and flicked them over to Billy, watching as his words slowly filtered through. When they finally reached their destination. Billy’s head jolted back, his eyes going wide, a pink flush blooming on his

cheeks.

“Oh,” he whispered.

Steve looked away and squeezed his eyes shut again. *God* — Was that not the least possible romantic way he could have done that? Why couldn’t he just say *“you’re hot, I like guys too, let’s bone and maybe fall in love”* like normal fucking person? What was *wrong* with him? He was amazed Billy hadn’t burst out laughing at him. Not only was it weird and awkward... It also was probably moving *way* too fast... Moving in together? Come on... They hadn’t even kissed yet and now he was asking Billy if he wanted to share a bed every night? Hell— He didn’t even know for sure if Billy even liked guys!

“Oh,” Billy said again, as though it was an involuntary sound he made every time his mind came around to the words Steve had just said. Steve rubbed the space between his eyes, frustrated with himself. He’d *ruined* it...

“Sorry— That was so awkward... God, I don’t even know why I did that... I’m sorry, I’ll just—“

“Wait!” Billy practically yelled, reaching forward desperately, putting his hand over his on the gearshift where it had moved to start driving away. He blinked and cleared his throat, looking to the side embarrassed. “I mean... Just... Wait a sec.... Okay?”

“Okay,” Steve said, his voice high. He pulled his hand away from the gearshift and turned in his seat, looking at Billy, wishing they could just transfer the emotions they were each feeling directly into each other’s brains. Billy bit his lip, rubbing his thighs anxiously.

“Okay,” he muttered, looking down at the carpet under his feet. “Okay... *Shit.* ”

He turned to Steve, stared at him for a few moments, and then looked away. Steve felt like he was in pain, on tender hooks, and every time Billy opened his mouth his heart slammed itself against his rib cage. Steve looked at Billy and watched as his teeth bit at his lips from inside his mouth, working away at the flesh, looking everywhere but at him. Steve’s face fell. Maybe he was gearing up to tell him that if

he had feelings like that for him, they couldn't be friends... Unable to bear the thought of hearing Billy say those words, he spoke up.

"Well," Steve mumbled, his voice low. "That was awkward and… You probably don't like guys, so… I mean… I understand if you gotta like… Get some distance or something..."

Billy's blue eyes stared right at him then, intense, his entire face a myriad of raw emotions, raging in the turn of his brows and the twitch of his lips. Steve felt caught in them.

"When me and Harley were fourteen, she told me she liked girls. We were hangin' at her apartment, on the deck. It was night time and her Mom kissed us goodnight. It was just the two of us. Then she asked me if I thought it'd be weird if a girl liked another girl... And d'you know what I said to her?"

"What?" Steve asked, his voice a whisper.

Billy looked at Steve's eager, hopeful face and felt like he might come apart at the seams, his entire being so full of love and shock and happiness that he knew he could never contain it, never stop it from finding its way out. His mind was blank. There was nothing but Steve.

"I said no," Billy told him, licking his lips and swallowing hard. "I said it wouldn't be weird... Because..."

Billy let his shoulders fall. He knew there were tears in his eyes because he'd been hurting in secret for so long, and now he finally felt like he was brave enough to speak.

"I said it wasn't weird 'cause I was really fuckin' confused and angry at myself... I—I thought I was fucking *broken* ... And when she said that she liked girls... It made me realize I wasn't alone... That I wasn't broken.. It made me realize that... That I was g-gonna be okay..."

Billy swallowed hard, feeling like he'd burst into tears at any moment. Steve let out a small gasp that Billy didn't even think was voluntary. He looked like Billy's words had punched him, knocking

the wind out of him.

“You... You were like... Me and Robin this whole time?” Steve said, his voice barely a whisper.

Billy closed his eyes, pained. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” he said, his voice cracking. “I just... I was scared. I was so, so scared...”

“I was scared too,” Steve said, a small, watery smile on his face. “But... Maybe I wasn’t as scared as you.”

“Y—Yeah,” Billy agreed, wiping the back of his hand across his nose, coughing lightly, tears overflowing from the rims of his eyes and onto his cheeks. “But... You aren’t alone. Right?”

“Right,” Steve said, nodding vigorously, openly crying.

Billy ground his palms into his eyes, rubbing them.

“Go— Go drive to that other house,” he said, half-chuckling, half-crying. “I wanna see it.”

“O—Okay,” Steve sniffed, laughing. Billy kept his palms in his eyes as the car started again, shifting into drive and taking off gently down the road. They drove for about five minutes, during which each of them kept looking at one another and laughing at how the other couldn’t stop crying. Steve turned on to a quiet cul-de-sac, and Billy recognized it as being one of the smaller, midsize developments nestled in the acres behind Main Street. As they drove slowly down the street, rows of small, neat 60s style houses greeted him from across lawns shaded by tall, older trees, bare now from winter. Steve came to stop beside a For Sale sign, and turned off the engine.

Billy looked at the house and wiped his eyes.

It was a relatively small, comfortable looking house, with a concrete front porch and a paved driveway. The wooden shingles were painted a pretty blue, a red brick chimney rising from its trim and well-kept roof. The windows looked cheery, big square things that looked out onto the road and onto the porch. Someone had clearly taken care of this house— It looked well looked after, even loved. Someone had taken the time to carve out a nice little garden that edged the front

walkway. Near the road, a big old oak tree swayed above them, extending its branches over the lawn. Around back, Billy could see the corner of what looked like a detached garage.

It wasn't anything fancy. It wasn't anything special.

But to Billy, it looked like home.

"You like this one a lot, don't you?" Steve said, smiling, leaning over and looking at it.

Billy looked at it and smiled. "I really like it," he said, not bothering to lie. He turned and looked at Steve, whose face was closer than he was expecting. Steve blinked and pulled away, his cheeks flushed.

"So— This is the one, then?" he asked. Billy knew he wasn't asking for permission to buy the house. There were other wonderful, beautiful, tantalizing things on the line.

"You know...," Billy began, slowly. "Sometimes I think about my life before Hawkins, you know?"

He took a deep breath.

"All the bullshit... All the horrible crap I had to go through... It felt like... It felt like I was never gonna escape, like I'd feel like shit for the rest of my life... And... And then, I met you," Billy said, his voice trembling. "And life is still really hard... It's still hard for me to wake up every morning and decide I wanna keep going... But since I met you, I *do* wanna keep going... I wanna keep trying... You make me wanna try... And life doesn't seem so bad when I'm with you."

Billy's soft voice murmured only a glimpse of the fire he felt in his body, only a fraction of the raging flame burning in his heart. He knew Steve must feel something for him, to offer all this, but he needed to tell him how he'd been feeling, how he'd been falling in love with Steve for a very, very long time. He had confessed his love for him in every way but words. He loved Steve like he loved the sun on his face, like he loved the warm tides washing over him. It was a love so deep it went beyond words, spilling out onto everyone around him. He couldn't hold onto that kind of love any longer without

sharing it, without letting him know. No matter what Steve said in return to him, no matter his answer, Billy had chosen to *be.* He had chosen the crooked blinds in his bedroom, Max's muted humming in the room next door, Susan's tired eyes. Life was easier with Steve, but he was willing to let life be what it was, no matter what happened.

Steve was silent for a long time. For once, Billy felt at peace. He had done the best thing he could ever do for himself and spoken the words living on his heart. When Steve finally did speak, his voice was quiet, trembling, and sincere.

"You know... I think a lot about who I used to be... I think a lot about the people I hurt... People I was supposed to love... People I *did* love... I think about how certain I was, how my life was like this... Unshakeable certainty... How I was dreading and excited for my life to begin and end, without anything exciting or different happening... And sometimes I used to be sad that I was never gonna have that life, and used to be fucking terrified that I didn't have a plan, that I didn't know what was gonna happen... But more and more..."

Steve licked his lips.

"Lately, when I think about the future, I'm not so worried about not knowing what's next... It's sort of this emptiness, this like... Beautiful thing that changes everyday. And sometimes I look out on that future, this crazy one where nothing is planned, and I do feel sort of lost... But there's one thing makes me feel brave... There's one thing that makes me think that maybe I could live a life I never planned... And that thing is... You, Billy."

Steve let out a little laugh.

"I have no idea what the future holds," he said. "But... One thing I am certain about is that whatever future happens... I want you in it."

"Steve," Billy murmured, staring into his face, his big brown eyes that he couldn't get enough of shining in the dimming evening light.

"I'm sorry I'm so cheesy, I just—"

Billy reached out and put his hand on Steve's cheek, pulling him

forward.

He kissed him.

It was soft, and sweet, and set so many things right in the dark places of Billy's heart. Steve was frozen against him for a moment before he slowly melted into it, threading his fingers through Billy's hair. Billy took his other hand and splayed it across Steve's upper back, the way they had done when they had danced in the warm summer night in June, listening to the crickets and the muffled downtempo music filtering to them from the doors of the gymnasium. There were no thoughts in his head, no worries— Just sheer undiluted joy.

Eventually, they pulled away, breathless.

Steve was staring at him in wonder, as though he had never seen anything like him— and maybe, until this moment, he hadn't. His lips were parted, pink from the kiss, his brown eyes so wide and so warm.

"You know," Steve whispered, his voice unsteady. "I always thought that kissing a guy would be weird... The moustache, you know? But... But I think I wanna... Do it again...."

Steve dove for him, crushing his lips against his, and Billy grinned against them, something howling and wonderful coming up like an explosion through his body. He deepened their kiss, flicking his tongue into Steve's mouth, who let him, opening his mouth, tilting his head, devouring Billy and letting Billy devour him. Billy roved his hands down Steve's back, down his arms, down his thigh... Steve's hands lost themselves in his long hair, clutching at his waist tightly. He knew it was broad daylight, in public, on a Saturday... But he couldn't find it in himself to care. After a good few minutes of losing himself in Steve's lips, he pulled away.

Steve was looking at him, his eyes wide, amazed, his cheeks flushed. Billy felt like roaring with happiness, crying his eyes out... He felt like his heart was brushing against the doors to heaven.

"So... Do y'wanna like... Go on a date or something?" Steve asked him, sounding breathless, a goofy grin spreading across his face.

“I think we might’ve already done that a few times already,” Billy said, an odd bark of laughter bursting from somewhere deep within.

Steve blinked. “Yeah,” he said. “I guess… Shit. I guess…”

He stopped.

“Wait, wait, wait… Have we been kinda dating… This whole time?”

Billy looked at the love of his life, his soul mate, his forever guy, and smiled.

“I love you, you fuckin’ dumbass,” he said.

Steve looked at him.

“I love you too… Dickhead.”

Billy leaned forward and kissed him.

21. BONUS TRACK: "Everywhere" - Fleetwood Mac (1987)

January 24th, 1988

Billy woke up slowly, not opening his eyes right away. The room was cold against his face and his back as Steve slowly got out of bed. He listened as he stretched, yawning loudly.

“Come on, babe,” Steve said, sitting back down on the bed and patting his shoulder. “Work.”

Billy groaned. “No.”

“Yep. Work time.”

“Ugh… Gross.”

“Come on. I’m gettin’ in the shower.”

“Mhm,” Billy agreed. He almost fell back to sleep again but caught himself, sighing, opening his eyes and looking blearily at the clock. Five fifty two in the morning. It wasn’t even light outside yet. He heard the shower start in the next room over and got out of bed, shivering, naked. He pelted out of the bedroom and into the bathroom, hopping into the shower and into the warm spray that was draining down Steve’s back. Steve grinned at him behind his hands as he shampooed his hair and Billy leaned against the backsplash, still half-asleep.

“Morning!” Steve greeted cheerily as he bent his head and rinsed the shampoo out. Billy shook his head crankily, annoyed.

“I hate that you like mornings,” he said over the water.

“I hate that you *don’t* ,” Steve quipped back, grinning as he shook out his wet hair and they switched positions, Billy dunking his head under the spray.

Someone knocked loudly on the door.

“Hurry up! I gotta shower too!” Max yelled angrily through the door.

“Just wait a sec!” Billy yelled back, annoyed. God. Mornings. Jesus Christ…

Steve got out of the shower and Billy leaned forward and slapped his ass before he could escape, grinning to himself. Steve let out a yelp and a laugh.

“Hey!”

Billy showered quickly and joined Steve at the bathroom mirror, shaking his head, letting Steve blast him with the hair drier for a few seconds as he did his own hair. Steve wrapped a towel around himself and left the bathroom. Billy grabbed one and covered himself, following him out, sticking his tongue out at Max as they passed her in the hall.

“God, you’re worse than the girls after gym!” she called after them as they went into their bedroom.

Billy dressed quickly, throwing on a shirt and a pair of jeans to wear under his stained navy jumpsuit, sitting on the end of the bed and pulling on a pair of socks, watching Steve as he pulled on a dress shirt and tie. He stood up, yawning, and pecked him on the forehead.

“I’ll get the coffee goin,’” he said, leaving the room.

He walked into the kitchen and greeted Susan, who was dressed and tiredly buttering toast. He made coffee on autopilot, getting out three mugs and plunking them on the counter. Susan slid a plate of toast over to him and he ate it, folding the slices in half and shoving them in his mouth as he poured coffee. Susan took hers gratefully, leaning against the counter and blowing on it.

Steve came striding into the room, sitting down at the kitchen table and pulling his toast and coffee toward him. Billy looked at the clock on the stove and jumped up, walking over to the bathroom door and

banging on it.

“Max, come on, you’re gonna be late!”

“Okay!” she yelled back.

Billy fished in his pockets for his keys and found they weren’t there. Nonplussed, he went to his jacket by the back door and searched it. They weren’t there either.

“Babe, you seen my keys anywhere?” he asked Steve, who was finishing his coffee and putting his plate in the sink.

“No,” Steve said, raising his eyebrows. Max finally came into the kitchen, grabbing her toast and shoving it into her mouth.

“I thought I saw them in the living room,” Susan said, putting her dishes in the sink and going over to the back door, putting on her coat. Max slid her backpack onto her shoulders.

“No, those were mine, Mom,” she said, yawning widely.

“Oh,” Susan said, shrugging. “I dunno then, dear.”

“S’fine, they’re here somewheres,” Billy shrugged, stepping forward and giving Susan a peck on the cheek and giving Max a quick hug. “Bye guys, see you tonight. Spaghetti.”

“Okay, love you both,” Susan called, waving to Steve. “Have a good day, guys.”

“Bye,” Max called. They left.

Billy went into his and Steve’s bedroom and searched the tables, the dresser… His keys were nowhere in sight.

“You find them yet?” Steve called from the kitchen, putting on his coat.

“No!” Billy called back, sighing heavily in frustration. Where the fuck

were they? He strode from the room to the closet at the front of the house. He hadn't worn any of these coats in a while, but it was worth a look…

"Well, did you check the bathroom?" Steve called, coming into the living room.

"No, why the fuck would I have my keys in the bathroom?" Billy demanded.

"I dunno, man!" Steve grumbled. "Ugh… We're gonna be late… *Again…* "

"Yes, Steve, we're gonna be late," Billy groused, his hand diving into the pocket of his jean jacket in the closet.

Steve threw his hands in the air, irritated, and went into the bathroom. Billy moved on to his leather jacket, digging in the pockets, checking each one. He plunged his hand into the inside pocket, and felt something inside. Furrowing his brow, he pulled it out.

It was a note in pen on yellow lined pad paper, folded and frayed on the edges. He looked at it. Something was familiar about this note. He opened it up, and his own messy writing spilled out before him.

Max—

I'm writing this to you because you're the only one who might be sad that I'm gone. If you're not, that's okay too. I'm not going to pretend like we were friends, or that we were close. We weren't. And it was my fault. You deserved a better big brother than me. You deserved someone to protect you, to take care of you, and I wasn't that person.

I leave you my car. It's yours. I know that you like it, and I know that you can drive it already. Just don't grind the gears too much. She's a lady. Treat her like one.

Tell your mom to leave Neil. Get a restraining order. I know you're just a kid and maybe you don't get what was going on. I'm sorry that it had to be this way. When I slammed Lucas against the wall and hurt Steve so

badly I realized I was just like my dad. I once said that I'd rather be dead than be like him. That's why I had to go away.

You're smart as hell and you were always way cooler than me. I hope you have a good life.

I love you.

Billy

His lips parted.

His suicide note.

"Found them!" Steve called triumphantly from the bathroom, laughing. He came striding into the living room, holding up the keys to the Camaro. "You goose, you left them hanging on the toothbrush holder…"

He looked over and caught sight of Billy's expression and stopped dead.

"Hey— What's wrong?"

Billy swallowed. He blinked once, but couldn't find the words, so he held out the note to Steve, who walked over cautiously and took it from him. He watched his eyes frantically race across the letters. When he was done, he looked into Billy's face.

"Billy— What...?"

Billy licked his lips and looked down at the carpet.

"After I beat you up, and I said sorry to you after I dropped Max off at that dance... I had, uh..."

Billy looked up into the ceiling, and couldn't help but smile.

"Well— I had decided to find my Dad's gun and shoot myself. I wrote that note right before I came out to apologize to you."

Steve stared at him, in awe, in pain, his eyebrows furrowed, his eyes

shining.

“Oh my God,” he whispered. He came over to stand beside Billy, putting a hand on his forearm. “I had no idea…”

“That was the point,” Billy shrugged.

Waking up wasn’t hard anymore.

He woke up and saw Steve right there, beside him. He woke up and Susan was making toast. He woke up and sometimes the rain was pattering softly on the windowpanes and he was warm and safe. He woke up and sometimes the light on the ceiling was pretty in all the right ways. He woke up, thought of the hard road ahead… Then he thought of Max, how he wanted to send her to college someday, the first person in their combined families to ever go— and he got up. He woke up, knowing he was loved, knowing he was safe, and groaning, moaning, exhausted— He got out of bed.

His life was worth it. He’d found joy.

“You… You don’t feel like this anymore, right?” Steve asked him, his voice small.

Billy turned to him and took the note from his fingers, folding it up. He slid it into the front of his jeans, smiling, his eyelids half closed, feeling nothing but warmth rising within him as he stared lovingly into Steve’s face.

“No, Steve,” he said quietly, taking a hand and pushing a little lock of hair out of Steve’s face. “No I don’t.”

Steve’s arms wrapped around him, a hand pushing the back of his head into the crook of his neck. He felt Steve’s lips on his forehead. He wrapped his arms slowly around Steve, his hands between his shoulder blades. He closed his eyes, crying, and smiling.

“I love you,” he said softly.

Everything was okay. Nothing was wrong.

Billy was, finally, at peace.

22. THANK YOU!

Thank you to everyone who read, left kudos, and wrote comments!

You've all been incredibly supportive and this experience has been just unbelievably awesome. I just wanted to add a little thank you at the end for all of you who've stuck with this and read it all the way through. You're all angels!

I am also a visual artist as well as a writer/poet, and I invite you all to follow me on my various social medias!

Tumblr: theboneyaard [theboneyaard dot tumblr dot com]

Instagram: @ theboneyaard

Twitter: @ boneyaard

Pinned to my tumblr is the cover art I made for this story! Feel free to go and check that out!

I take writing and art commissions, and I'm currently plucking away at an original horror novel. Feel free to DM me! I also love Star Trek, Yu-Gi-Oh!, InuYasha, Good Omens, dogs, queer history, low-poly rendered animals, midcentury graphic design, the ocean, and pizza. Feel free to chat!

NOW, WITHOUT FURTHER ADO: HERE IS THE FULL TRACK LIST OF THIS GAY ASS PLAYLIST I USED TO NAME THE CHAPTERS SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO SCROLL THROUGH! lmfao

1) You've Got Another Thing Comin' - Judas Priest
2) Cruel Summer - Bananarama
3) Boys Don't Cry - The Cure
4) You Might Think - The Cars
5) Zombie Dance - The Cramps
6) All Touch - Rough Trade
7) Say You, Say Me - Lionel Ritchie

8) Goody Two Shoes - Adam Ant
9) Please, Please, Please, Let Me Get What I Want - The Smiths
10) I Want To Break Free- Queen
11) Kiss Off - Violent Femmes
12) Skidmarks On My Heart - The Go-Gos
13) I Want To Know What Love Is - Foreigner
14) Don't Get Me Wrong - Pretenders
15) Ophelia - The Band
16) Wish You Were Here - Pink Floyd
17) Don't Lose My Number - Phil Collins
18) Addicted to Love - Robert Palmer
19) Dancing in the Dark - Bruce Springsteen
20) Town Called Malice - The Jam
21) Everywhere - Fleetwood Mac

Thank you again for all the love I've gotten on this fic! It's the first story I've finished since I was fourteen years old, and it's been an awesome ride!

Bless you all!

S.C.A.Paynter